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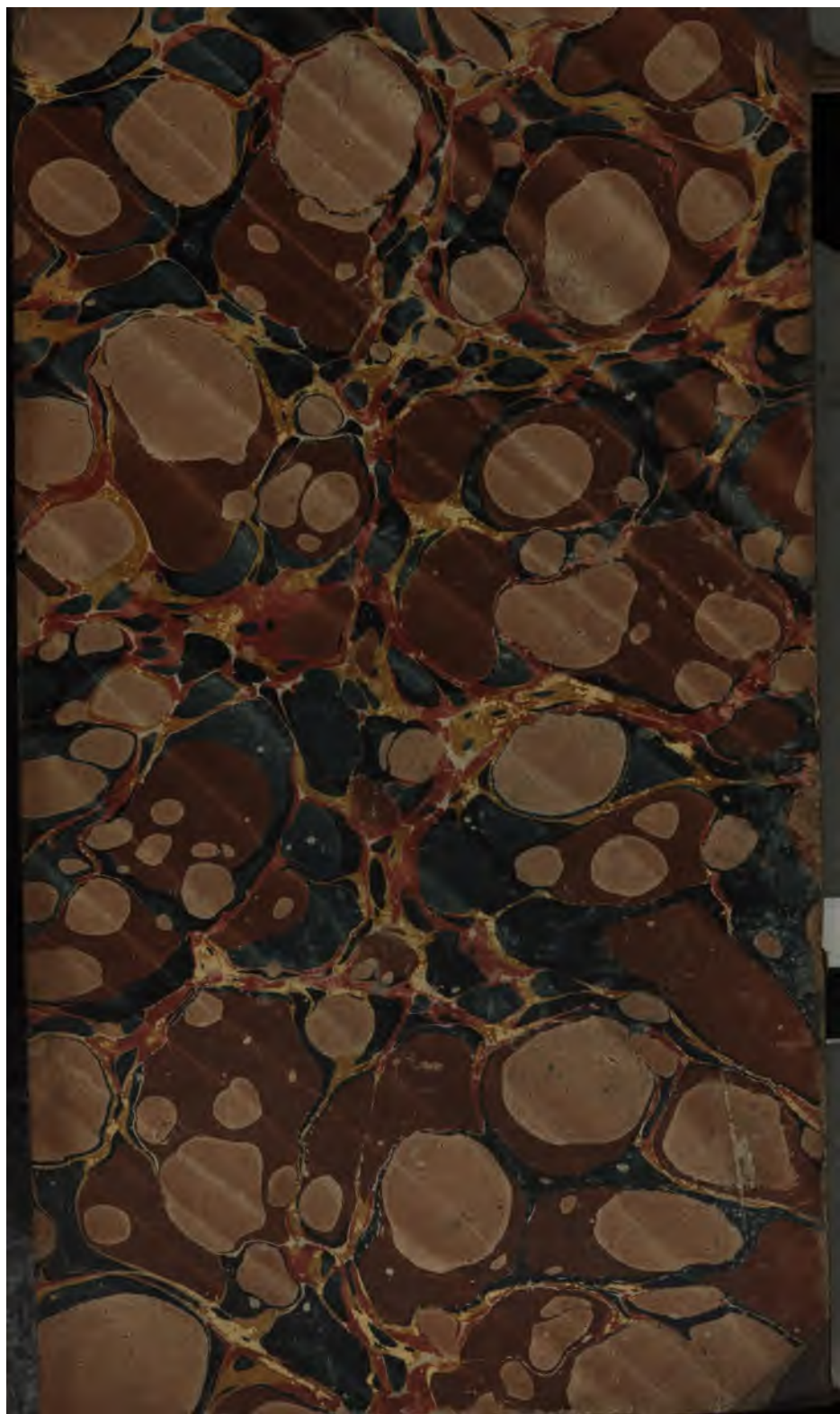
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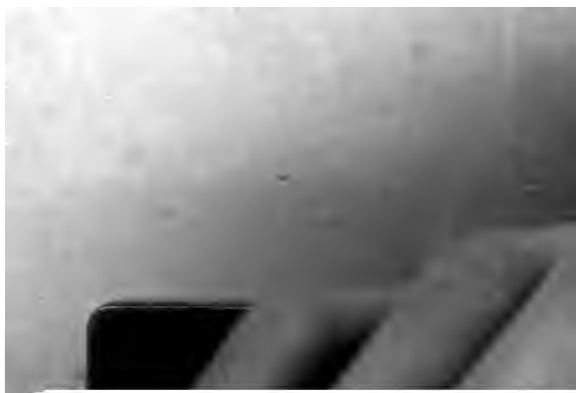
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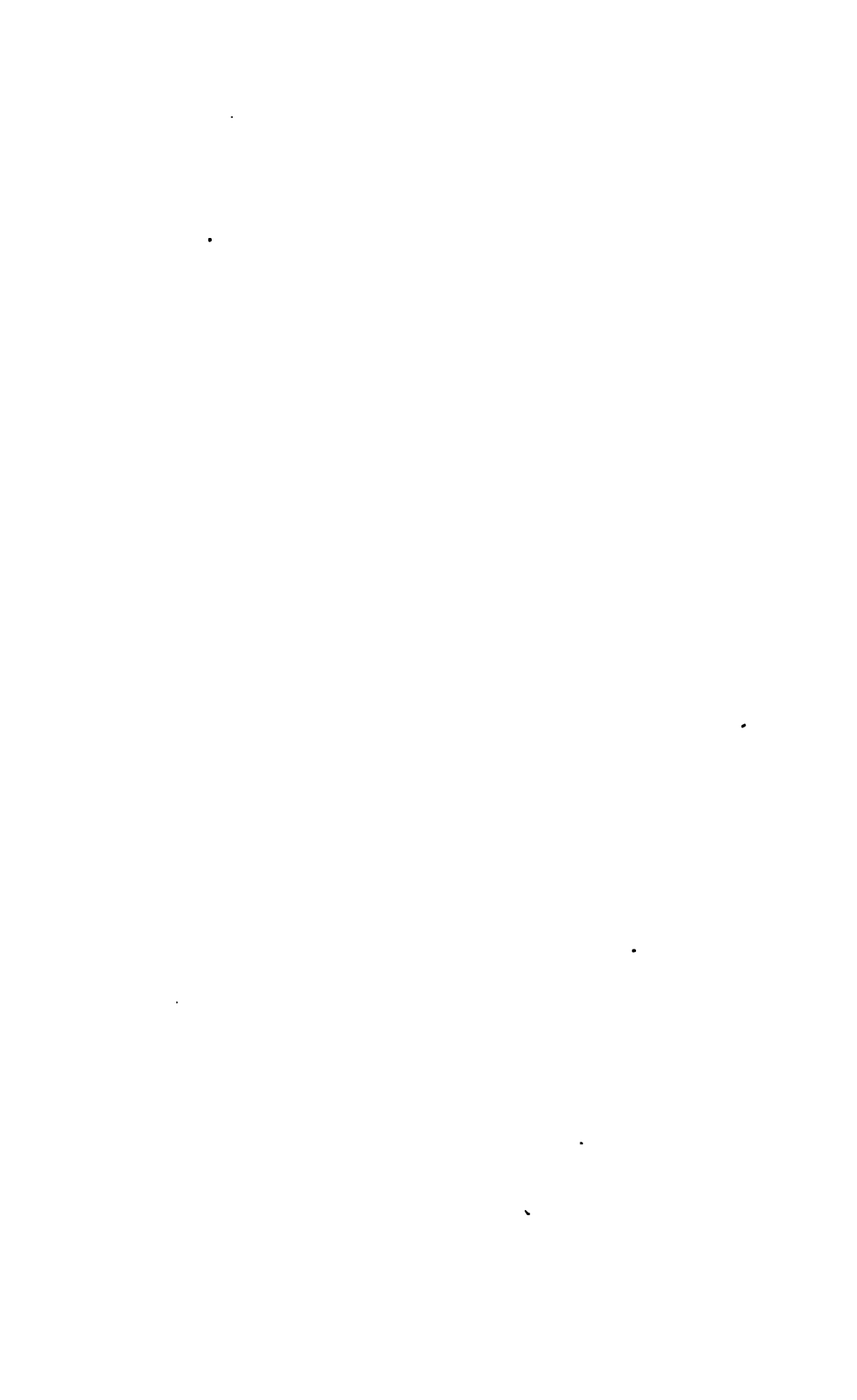
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FERNLEY MANOR,

A NOVEL

BY

MRS. MACKENZIE DANIELS,

AUTHOR OF

"MY SISTER MINNIE." "THE POOR COUSIN."
"OUR GUARDIAN," &c., &c.

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FERNLEY MANOR.

CHAPTER I.

ANTICIPATED CHANGE.

SHORTLY after this conversation between the sisters, Edith wrote to her mother, informing her, in the first place, of the loss she had sustained, and adding a brief, but perfectly truthful record of her own life since she had left Italy. The letter was affectionate, earnest, and even eloquent—for Edith was most anxious to win her mother's

love, and quite prepared to give an unlimited measure of filial affection in return.

Margaret's description had certainly not been very promising ; but then her simple, straightforward nature, so detested all kinds of mystery, that Edith could not help thinking she had been prejudiced by the previous conduct of her father's wife, and that this prejudice made her still see everything relating to her in an unfavourable point of view. At any rate, the daughter was determined to hope for the best, and she waited with great solicitude for an answer to her letter.

The sisters were sitting down to breakfast one morning—it was the week before Christmas,—when a servant brought in two letters, and laid them on the table beside Edith. She glanced hastily at the addresses, became very pale on seeing a strange female hand, but left that where it had been placed, and opened the other first.

"From dear Annie," she exclaimed, after having read it hastily through. "She writes in rather better spirits. Mrs. Boisragon's recovery progresses slowly but satisfactorily—they will go abroad as soon as she is able to travel—in the beginning of spring, Annie hopes. But you may read it, if you will Margey, for I see this one," (laying her hand quite tenderly upon it) is from my mother."

Margaret took the offered letter in silence, knowing well what her sister must feel at such a moment, and Edith, with trembling fingers and palpitating heart, broke the seal of the one she held in her hand, and eagerly devoured the contents.

In a few minutes, Margaret looked up to see if it was finished, and to judge, by Edith's countenance, how far her expectations had been realized. This, however, was not so easy, for the latter had buried her face in her hands, and appeared to be thinking intently; while the letter, which

Margaret could see was very short, lay open on the table beside her.

"Now let me send you some tea, dear Edith," she said, quietly, as though nothing had happened; "I am sure we require something to warm us this cold morning."

"We do indeed," the other replied, with a faint, odd smile, and Margaret fancied there had been tears hastily brushed away.

"Yes, do give me something to warm me, Margey," she resumed presently, after another little thoughtful pause. "This letter," (glancing slightly at it) "is scarcely calculated to produce that effect. Read it, however, and give me your opinion."

Margaret obeyed and read, with less surprise than her sister, the following—

"I thank you, my dear Edith, for the candour of your communication. I had certainly hoped to welcome a single,

and not a married daughter, to my solitary home. Of course, however, this will make no difference to my *conduct*, and of feelings it would be idle now to speak. I shall expect you on Christmas Eve at the subjoined address, which will be your future residence.

“Yours in anticipated affection,

“EMILY LASCELLES.”

“*Woodleigh Cottage, Hampstead,*

“*Near London.*”

“Well, Margaret, what do *you* think of it?”

“It is concise, certainly, and not particularly warm ; but it would be very unfair to judge your mother by her first letter, Edith. It is possible that she fears from your having been married, that you will have no affection to bestow on her.

Do not let this make you uncomfortable, dear."

"I will not—if I can help it," said Edith, slowly folding up the letter, and putting it in her pocket. "But now, dearest Margaret, I must think only about you."

Of course Edith's proposed plan of having Margaret with her in her new home, was done away with, for the present, at least, by the coldness and formality of her mother's letter; but still she could not endure the thoughts of a total separation, especially under the new aspect that her re-union with this unknown parent had assumed. Margaret was no less affected at the idea of parting with Edith, but she tried to speak cheerfully of it, and to anticipate brighter days. In reference to her sister's suspicions, concerning Mr. Howard, the present rector of Fernley, she now said—

"Had any distinct engagement existed between us, be assured, you, dear Edith,

would not have been left in ignorance of it, but this is far from being the case. That he likes me better than any of the marriageable ladies of his acquaintance, I certainly believe; that he will one day ask me to be his wife, I think probable—and I have no hesitation in saying to you, Edith, that when that day arrives, unless my present feelings greatly change, I shall accept him.”

“ Dear, dear Margaret,” said Edith, half smiling through her tears as she grasped her sister’s hand, “ you do and say everything in such a nice, clear, simple way—so different from other people—Oh, I do hope that he will propose, since you really like him ; and that you will be very, very happy.”

That week was spent by the sisters in making arrangements for leaving Fernley Manor (which though taken on lease they had the privilege of under-letting), and of dividing those possessions, such as books, music, drawings, &c., which they had

hitherto shared in common. A trifling incident occurred during this latter occupation, which brought back all the past most vividly to Edith's mind, and quite upset her for the remainder of that day.

Margaret was seated ~~at~~ a table with several large portfolios before her, containing the sketches they had both taken at different periods of their wanderings; and though the number of her own greatly exceeded that of her sister's, she was making an equal distribution, placing Edith's share on one side, and her own on the other, as they came.

"I wonder," she said, with an effort to talk away their mutual depression, "to whose lot that last sketch I took in Florence, will fall. The scene at moonlight, I mean, that you admired so much, Edith."

"To yours, Margey, I daresay;" was the reply, "you are always luckier than I am."

And it turned out that she was right. But Margaret, with her usual unselfishness,

proposed giving it up, and taking the next herself.

"Indeed, dear," she urged, "I do not care at all about it, and it is a favourite of yours. Do let me put it amongst your collection; I am quite sure I shall prefer the next."

"And what is that?" asked Edith, who was busy with the music books, and at some distance from her sister.

"I don't know yet—its back is turned towards me, and I will not look till you promise to have this Florence sketch."

"Oh, but I won't, Margey—not for the world, because I am quite certain, from your pressing it upon me, that it is one greatly esteemed by yourself. Besides I have a particular fancy for the next—something tells me that it will be of a spot or a scene that I shall have infinite pleasure in recalling."

As Edith spoke, she walked across the room to Margaret's table, and laid her

hand upon the drawing that was next in succession to the disputed one.

"There, this is mine, Margey—I claim it, and we'll see if it does not turn out to be more valuable than yours."

She raised it suddenly, and exhibited—not a fair Italian scene, not a group of Norman peasants or Swiss muleteers, or Spanish dancing girls (all of which were in Margaret's varied collection) but the rustic bridge at Fernley, leading to the Heather Dell.

Edith looked at it for a moment and then let it fall on the table again, while she turned away without uttering a word.

"How stupid of me," exclaimed Margaret, looking almost as pale and discomposed as her sister, "I believed that all the English sketches had been placed in a separate portfolio—Dear Edith, we will leave the rest of this work for to-morrow; and take a little walk now while the sun is shining."

* * * * *

The last evening, at length, or, as the sisters would have said, too soon arrived, and Margaret reminded Edith that she could no longer delay a duty which she had some time ago proposed, but lacked courage to perform. This was to call upon the old ladies at Fernley Cottage—henceforth Margaret's home—and renew, before parting, those feelings of friendliness which had necessarily been interrupted by Edith's own conduct, but which the elder sister felt convinced they were now quite prepared to restore to the penitent offender.

Edith had not once been in their house since the evening of the orchard party, and she shrank nervously, as one who has suffered greatly, from having those old associations revived. Nevertheless, feeling it her duty, and knowing that every fresh trial was but a just recompense for her former errors, she immediately, on Margaret's suggestion, prepared for the walk, and set forth unaccompanied but by

old Peter and her dog Nero, as on the occasion of her first memorable visit to the cottage.

It was impossible not to recall with peculiar vividness the evening in question. The village streets had precisely the same quiet, monotonous, unbusiness-like appearance. The same old women stood idly at their cottage doors—the same children, (or what seemed to Edith the same) dropped their awkward curtsies as she passed—the same dingy-looking poultry pecked about the narrow gutters ; and the very wind appeared to blow with the same hollow and melancholy sound.

“ The change *without* how dimly seen,
The change *within* how clearly felt.”

Arriving at her destination, Edith was still more painfully struck with what

seemed to her a mysterious similitude between her first visit and her present one; which would probably also be the last. In walking up the garden, she saw the three old people sitting by the fire, just as they had been sitting then; the favourite cat upon its accustomed stool, and Mr. Simeon again holding in his hand an open letter. For a moment, the young widow almost fancied the past a dream, and that she was only going now, as Miss Lascelles, to form the acquaintance of her pleasant-looking neighbours, and the relatives of one who, though then unknown, had already mingled in many of her girlish visions of the future.

Alas! the black dress and the wedding-ring—to say nothing of the wasted hand it shines upon—soon dissipate the mists from her sight; and she knocks timidly at the spinsters' door, with a full and oppressive consciousness of all her errors and misfortunes, since that comparatively happy and unclouded time.

Nothing, however, could be kinder or more affectionate than the reception the old people give her ; nothing more considerate and thoughtful than the topics of conversation they select. Not a word, not a hint referring to the past is suffered to escape their lips, and Edith is only reminded of it by Miss Eliza (with whom she had always been an especial favourite) bursting into tears when she took her hand, and saw the wedding-ring, which was now "a world too wide" for the widow's shrunken finger.

"Poor dear, poor dear!" Miss Eliza had said then, as if quite unable to restrain her compassionate feelings. "I do hope your mama will make you drink quarts of goat's milk every morning, or I don't know what you'll come to by and bye."

Edith fully appreciated the kind consideration with which she was treated, and which she could not but acknowledge far exceeded either her deserts or her expectations. But still she felt anxious about

the letter Mr. Simeon had so hastily put away on her entrance, and longed to know whether it was from Scotland or from Devonshire.

Finding they had no intention of alluding to it, she summoned courage, at last, to say—

“Have you heard from Nettia or her mother lately?”

“Not since last week, my dear,” was the reply; “and then the invalid was going on pretty well.”

Edith still looked anxious and restless; and Miss Eliza, after a hastily exchanged glance with her sister, said, rather nervously—

“The letter Simeon was reading, when you came in, my dear, was from Sir Stuart Bernarde, who is just on the point of going abroad. It relates to some business matters, which—”

“Which, perhaps, Eliza,” interrupted her sister, “it will be as well to explain to

Mrs. Boisragon, for you see, as Alick's widow, she may have an interest in them."

Miss Eliza then explained what the reader already knows in part—that Sir Stuart had made over to his cousins the half of his fortune, and that he had done this in such a way, as to render it impossible for them to restore it to him without additional law proceedings, which would be beyond their means to enter upon. He communicated this to Mr. Cargill, because Mrs. Boisragon had refused the gift, on the part of her children, and Sir Stuart wished it to be distinctly understood, by some member of the family, that this refusal had done nothing to alter the former position of affairs—that the money was still theirs, and would continue to accumulate in their names, as long as they refused to claim it. From this letter to Mr. Simeon Cargill it was evident that the writer of it was still in ignorance, both of Alick's marriage and death, and he hinted that it would be a

satisfaction to him to hear occasionally of the family.

"This, my dear," said Miss Eliza, in conclusion, "is the substance of the baronet's communication, and we shall now consider it our duty to inform him of certain events which have recently occurred. As for the money, I do not believe our cousins will ever touch it ; but, as Sir Stuart has plenty without this, I see no harm in letting it remain as it is, for the present. There is no saying what may happen by-and-bye."

Edith had listened with the deepest attention to the foregoing statement, which Miss Eliza's very minute and circumstantial style of language, rendered rather a long one ; but she only thanked the well-meaning spinsters for the confidence they reposed in her, and made no other comment whatever.

Shortly after this, Peter and Nero returned to conduct her home, and she parted from these kind old friends with

sincere emotion, which, on their part, was demonstrated by loud sobs, and repeated embracings, accompanied by fervent wishes, and prayers for her future welfare and happiness.

Mr. Simeon struggled for a few painful moments, with his fear of Nero, and his desire to offer an arm to the very interesting young widow, who bore, too, the honoured name so long cherished in his heart.

Let him not be too severely judged, when it is acknowledged that his gallantry gave place, at last, to the weakness of many long years standing, and that he suffered his youthful guest to depart, as she had come, followed closely by her two faithful guardians.

CHAPTER II.

THE PARTING OF THE SISTERS.

"SUCH a day, my poor Edith, for your journey," said Margaret, entering her sister's room, before she had risen on the following morning. "The snow is already quite thick upon the ground, and there is a sharp easterly wind that seems to chill one to the very bone. Will you have a fire lighted here, my love, and take your breakfast in bed?"

"Oh, Margey, not for the world,"

replied Edith, springing up immediately, and beginning to dress with all possible speed ; “ I would not lose a single instant of your society, to purchase every comfort under the sun. But indeed, Margaret, I scarcely feel the cold. My mind is too full of sad and anxious thoughts.”

When they were seated together at breakfast, Margaret asked her sister if she had traced out any distinct plan for her future mode of life, or if she intended to submit herself unreservedly to the will and guidance of her mother.

“ If,” replied Edith, speaking with very deep and earnest feeling, “ I am fortunate enough to gain my mother’s love and confidence, I shall be only too happy to yield in all things, which my conscience does not disapprove, to her. If otherwise, —as I have thought of late may possibly be the case—I shall still endeavour to fulfil every duty towards her ; but retaining, at the same time, the privilege of thinking and acting for myself. My life, Margaret,

now, has only two great objects—earthly objects, I mean, for I hope I understand, at length, wherefore we were created, and that I can never again be indifferent to the interests of the Eternal world. But these two earthly objects are very near to my heart, and I can imagine no regular plan of life which would not have their accomplishment in view, which would not, in some way, assist me in bringing them to pass. Putting these aside, it is my earnest desire to be enabled to do some little good with the means that have been given to me ; and although I don't know very well how to set about it, I have no doubt opportunities will arise to me as they do to other people."

Margaret could not tell whether Edith had forgotten to name the objects of which she had spoken, or whether the omission was intended. She would not, however, risk the chance of paining her, by asking questions ; and the conversation soon turned into different channels.

It had been arranged that both sisters should leave the Manor about the same time, that neither of them might be exposed to the trial of remaining alone in the deserted house, after the other had gone. Old Peter was to bring a post-chaise for Edith at ten o'clock, and Miss Eliza Cargill, or her brother, had promised to fetch Margaret punctually at that hour.

Punctuality, however, which, with some people, means half an hour after the time, with others, means half an hour before ; and the amiable spinsters of Fernley Cottage, happened to belong to the latter class of individuals—so that the sisters had scarcely risen from the breakfast table when a carriage rattled up briskly to the door (the snow having been carefully swept away from the entrance drive) and disclosed the cheerful face of Miss Eliza, half hidden in her squirrel furs, and the no less agreeable one (I suppose, Margaret thought it infinitely more so) of Mr. How-

ard, peeping, half-shyly, half-laughingly, over his companion's shoulder.

"Dear Margey," whispered Edith, kissing her sister's fair and blushing cheek, "I am so glad he has come ; because now, you will go away quite cheerfully ; and really, I have scarcely seen my future brother-in-law yet. I like his face extremely, Margey, now he is looking merry and happy—I do, indeed."

Margaret had only time to say—

"Hush, dear !" before the lady and gentleman entered the room, Miss Eliza divided most uncomfortably between an intense desire to be eloquent about the weather, and an ardent wish to explain that she had met Mr. Howard, half frozen in the village, and persuaded, or rather obliged, him to enter her carriage, and come on with her to fetch Miss Lascelles.

Mr. Howard was a young man of about nine-and-twenty or thirty, with an extremely pleasant and sensible face, and the unmistakeable air of a thorough gentleman.

It did not require an abundant degree of penetration to discover that he admired Margaret—and Edith saw plainly that he only wanted sufficient encouragement to declare himself her lover. They both looked very happy and satisfied with each other at present ; and, altogether, the party destined to depart first, seemed as well assorted, and as pleasant a one as could possibly be imagined.

Poor Edith could not help picturing to herself the manner in which *their* Christmas Eve would bespent. The chairs drawn round the blazing fire, the hissing urn, the spinster's cheerful, social faces, their brother's quiet jokes aimed at the unheeding lovers—the lovers themselves, talking in low tones, and forgetting all but that they were together.

“Dear Margaret,” said the younger sister, as they went upstairs for Miss Lascelles to put on her bonnet and cloak. “I almost forget my own sorrows in seeing your happiness. You must write and tell me the

moment it is all settled—for it *will* be settled very soon, I know.”

Margaret replied by taking Edith in her arms—and assuring her that, at this moment, the thoughts of leaving her, occupied far more of her thoughts than her own future prospects. She could not endure the idea of going first, either—Edith would feel so wretched till her carriage came. But then those poor horses shivering in the cold, and Mr. Howard’s numerous pastoral duties must be remembered too. Edith had thought of these, and she assured her sister that she should feel no additional pain in remaining a few minutes in the house alone.

So, at length, with one prolonged and mute embrace, these two, who had, for so many years, been all in all to each other, parted for an indefinite time ; and Edith, refusing to shew herself again down stairs, stood at the window, and watched the carriage drive away.

It was not till it had really gone, till the

last faint sound of the wheels had died in the distance, that her poor heart became fully conscious of what it had lost, and of the dread feeling of utter loneliness. Amongst the varied sufferings which mortal beings are compelled, during their pilgrimage, to taste, I suppose there is none which, for the time it endures, is more bitter and sickening to the soul than sudden and complete solitude—not a solitude that is to last a week or a month only, but a solitude of which we cannot see the end ; a deprivation by death or unbending circumstance, of those who have been the recipients of all our thoughts, the sharers of all our joys and pains—our companions and friends from unremembered time.

All this and far more, Margaret had been to Edith, and the desolate girl felt, in the first moments of anguish, that it would be impossible for her to persevere in the new path she had chosen ; impossible to exchange this ever tender, loving sister and

friend, for an unknown mother, whose affection she almost despaired of gaining.

But then came the thought that this dear sister, whose long, unwearying devotion, was at present so vividly before her, had now admitted other tenants into her heart, or rather one who would fill all its vacant places, and beside whom, even she, the long cherished darling, would be as nothing.

Alone then for evermore ! Life without sunshine or moonlight ! Such seemed the prospect remaining for her who had once been endowed with magic power to draw all who gazed at her, to her feet.

There was one, it is true, whom neither **sorrow nor sin** could ever have changed, one whose love would have shielded her through storm and tempest, who would have clung more closely when all others forsook, who would have held her to his heart during the long journey of life, and gloried in every care or pain he could have borne for her dear sake.

But he was sleeping far, far away in the quiet church-yard, and the cold rains and the drifting snows, and the wild winds of the stormy north swept alike unheeded, over his grave.


CHAPTER III.

THE MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

EDITH had endeavoured to arrange her journey so that she should arrive about eight o'clock in the evening ; but owing to an unavoidable delay on the road, the clocks from various parts of London were striking ten, when her post-chaise rattled along the broad streets of the west end of the town ; and she had still to get to Hampstead and discover Woodleigh cottage.

The snow had quite ceased falling now, and the night, though very cold, was clear and beautiful. There was an aspect too of busy life and social enjoyment, even at this late hour, amongst the pedestrians who still thronged the great thoroughfares, that was quite cheering to the solitary traveller, after the loneliness of the long, dull day. But occasionally, as they got more into the suburbs, the old feeling of intense depression would return with renewed force, when, through the half drawn curtain of some gaily lighted house, she saw young figures moving joyously in the merry dance, and caught the sound of mirthful music mingling with peals of childish laughter, that rang in her ears long after they had first been heard.

It seemed to Edith that she alone of all in that great city, was destined to spend this Christmas Eve in cheerless solitude ; that she alone, of all the thousands who were "waking still" had a heart wherein only tears were dwelling. Poor Nero, her



last remaining companion, lay sleeping in quiet contentment at her feet, and as she bent to caress his shaggy head (to remind herself that she had yet something left to love her in the midst of all) the dog looked up gratefully and licked her hand, as if to assure his sorrowing mistress that *his* fidelity at least was unshaken, and his affection the same as it had ever been.

"We at all events will never part, my good old friend," she said, renewing her caresses—but faster and faster fell her tears in reflecting that amidst the whole world there was not one, save this poor dumb animal, to whom she was a first object of attachment and solicitude.

Notwithstanding that they had now been some time going at a foot's pace through the straggling village of Hampstead, it seemed that they were no nearer their destination than when they had first entered it; and Edith began to think that Woodleigh Cottage was as much a mystery as its present inmate. Old Peter had already

descended at least half-a-dozen times from his seat on the box, to knock up quiet tradespeople, of whom they might enquire the way. But one and all professed total ignorance of the locality of Woodleigh cottage, and several even went so far as to assert that the place had no existence save in the brain of the greatly puzzled enquirer.

At length, just as the clocks struck half-past eleven, and while Edith was debating in her own mind as to the expediency of going to an hotel for the night, an old woman, with a lantern in her hand, and who looked, Edith thought, extremely like one of the wicked fairies of her childhood, came close up to the carriage, and enquired what place they wanted to find.

"Woodleigh Cottage, my good woman ;" said Edith, in a mild voice from the window "and if you can shew us the way I shall most gladly recompense you for your trouble."

"My recompense," replied the ill favoured female, flashing her lantern very uncere-

moniously in the lady's face, "will be to get to bed some time between this and morning. It's a pleasant way for a christian woman to spend a holy night like this, wandering about lonely streets at the risk of being froze to death. Go on now—will you ? (to the driver) There's a good mile before us yet."

Before Edith or her attendant could ask a single question of this very unprepossessing individual, she was striding on again some paces in advance of the carriage ; and acting thus as a pilot, she steadily kept her course, never turning or looking back till they arrived at the long sought cottage, which stood at the end of a dismal looking lane, apart from every other habitation, and enclosed in a high walled garden, whose snow-capped trees had very much the appearance of a party of friendly spectres, waiting to welcome Edith to her new home.

"So here we are at last," said the old woman, producing an enormous key from

her pocket ; and unlocking the garden gate
" You must please to get out now, ma'am ;
for there's no room for carriages here."

" I suppose," said Edith, quite timidly,
(for still she could not avoid associating
this peremptory person with the wicked
fairies of yore) " that as it is so late, ac-
commodation can be found in the cottage for
my servant."

" I'm sure I don't know where," was the
sharp reply. " There's plenty of inns up
yonder ; he'd better go back to one of
them."

Edith supposing (not unnaturally) from
the woman's manner, that she was a person
of some authority in her mother's household,
yielded this point reluctantly, and old
Peter, with many an anxious glance after
his young mistress, whom he could not en-
dure leaving in such strange company,
departed, with the carriage and the driver,
down the dismal lane.

" That dog's not a coming with us, I
should *think*," was the first observation

Edith had the pleasure of listening to, when she was left alone with her mother's servant.

"Indeed he is," Edith answered firmly, determined not to yield an inch where Nero was concerned. "I am quite sure my mother would never wish me to give up such an old favourite as this is—Come, my poor old Nero ; you shall have your supper soon."

The wicked fairy gave utterance to a succession of undistinguishable mutterings, to which her companion paid no attention—And thus they walked up to the cottage door, where admittance was obtained, in the same way that it had been to the garden—by a key brought from the capacious pocket of the old she dragon, who appeared to have the whole of Woodleigh Cottage under her stern guardianship.

"You don't want those things carried upstairs to-night, I should *think*," she said, pointing to the few light boxes that Edith had brought with her, and which Peter


had deposited just outside the door of the house.

“Pray leave them where they are, if you like,” was the rather impatient reply, “and take me at once to my mother.”

Another succession of mutterings followed this, in which Edith fancied she could distinguish the intimation of a wish, not too respectfully conveyed, that the haste she now manifested had been acted upon during the former part of the day.

“This way, then, if you want to see missis,” she said, aloud—“but it’s most like she’s asleep; so you’d better not come forward till I wake her—people has no nerves in these days,”

Surprised at even this consideration from such an apparently bitter individual, Edith followed her guide along a narrow passage to a door, which the woman opened softly, and (for a wonder) without a key. A green curtain hung just inside, probably to keep out the cold draughts, and behind this the daughter stationed herself, for



a moment, at her companion's bidding, while the latter advanced into the rather extensive room, to ascertain whether her mistress was awake or asleep.

From her concealed position, Edith took a minute and somewhat atonished survey of the apartment. It was a long, but not a very wide one, with two bay windows at the farthest end. The furniture was of the simplest—not to say shabbiest kind; and the only ornaments it could boast, consisted of an almost ridiculous quantity of holly and other evergreens, suspended in some ingenious manner from the walls, and filling (to the imminent risk of their downfall) the few antiquated looking vases that stood on the mantel-piece. The remains of what had probably been a good fire, burnt dimly in the grate, and not far from this, stood a sofa, on which Edith supposed her mother was reclining, but it was so completely in the shade, and seemed to be so covered with shawls, that she had only formed this opinion from the

fact of the old woman bending her slow steps in that direction. She was beginning to feel greatly excited, however, now ; and gently patting Nero to keep him quiet, she held her breath to listen.

"Please to wake up, madam," said the wicked fairy standing beside the couch, and modulating her harsh voice to the softest of tones. "They're come at last, and the young lady wants to see you before she goes to bed."

Edith now distinguished a female figure in deep mourning, emerge slowly from the mass of shawls that had covered it, and as far as she could judge in the dim light, she fancied the face was pale and beautiful.

"What do you mean by *they*, Hannah ?" replied the tall stately figure, now standing erect in the room. "Is not Mrs. Boisragon alone ?"

("Why not *my daughter* ?" thought poor Edith, and her heart grew sadder than before.)

"There's a dog," said the amiable

Hannah, "that's as big again as herself—*that's all!*" with determined emphasis on the last words.

"But where is she?" asked the stately lady in what Edith fancied an angry tone. "Am I to go to her, Hannah, or will she condescend to come to me?"

Edith, trembling in every limb, now sprang forward, followed closely by Nero, and as they stood thus for a moment, side by side, a prettier or more touching picture could scarcely be imagined. The thin form of the childish-looking widow contrasting admirably with the huge proportions of the noble looking dog—her pale face and dewy eyes, raised timidly to the stately figure before them—his honest, faithful face gazing up lovingly into hers.

"Dearest mother," she said, in a low and tremulous voice, "your servant feared to alarm you, and desired me to remain here till she had warned you of my arrival. I am, indeed, only too glad to come to you."

Mrs. Lascelles had started violently on the first sound of her daughter's voice. Her countenance expressed deep emotion of some kind ; but of what, it was not so easy to determine. Her eyes, which Edith thought more beautiful than anything she had ever seen, appeared positively to expand, as she gazed at her who had spoken so softly and timidly, and her pale, marble-looking cheek flushed to the deepest red, and then became, if possible, whiter than before. At last, she spoke, and the hopes which her evident emotion had excited in her daughter's bosom died away, leaving not a trace of their existence behind.

"Edith, I am rejoiced to see you—*at last*. (Mrs. Lascelles seemed like her servant to have a peculiar talent for emphasizing the concluding words of her sentences.) "I fear you must be very tired. It is past midnight."

"Oh, I am not tired," exclaimed Edith, looking up imploringly into the beautiful

face that was bent down upon her. "Dearest mama, I am only sorry to have kept you up."

Then Mrs. Lascelles, coming a step nearer, but still with a half reluctant air that fell chill upon her daughter's heart, stooped to kiss the fair forehead of her trembling child, and led her to the sofa from which she had lately risen.

"You had better rest yourself now, while Hannah makes up the fire, and gets you some supper—Hannah," (to the old woman who had remained stationary during the whole time), "you will do well to begin at once, for you, too, must be quite worn out."

"Pray have nothing got for me," said Edith, quickly, and in a choking voice. "Indeed, I could not eat ; but if there is anything for my poor old dog, I should be obliged to Hannah to let him have it."

Mrs. Lascelles now turned her attention to Nero, who, at his mistress's bidding, had laid down quietly on the heart-rug.

“That is a great favourite of yours, I suppose, Edith,” she said, with something that bore a faint resemblance to a smile. “Did he belong to your husband?”

“No, he has always been mine, since I was quite a child,” replied Edith. “He is a very great favourite indeed, mama; and if you can give him house room I shall esteem it a particular kindness. Nero and I should find it hard to part now.”

“Feed the dog, Hannah,” said Mrs. Lascelles turning from Edith to her servant, “and then go to bed yourself. I can dispense with your services for this one night.”

“May I not supply Hannah’s place?” the daughter asked, as soon as the door had closed on that personage. “It would give me such pleasure, mama?”

“My dear, I am obliged to you; but it is unnecessary. I am quite able to do for myself all that Hannah is accustomed to do—only the poor woman, from long habit,

likes to wait upon me. Shall *you* require assistance in undressing Edith."

"Oh no, thank you."

She dared not trust her voice to say more than this ; she was beginning to feel so miserably, hopelessly wretched.

Mrs. Lascelles sat, for a few minutes, quite silent too. Then she said—

"I hope you will find your own rooms pretty comfortable, Edith. I have only been able to give you two, the cottage being small, but whatever there may be wanting, you must ask for—and in time, I sincerely trust, you will be enabled so far to forget the past as to tolerate your present existence."

Edith longed to say that she only asked a little love, a little sympathy, from her who should have had abundance of both to bestow, to render her entirely contented with the existence now before her. But how could she say so ? how could she give utterance to any one of the burning

thoughts within her soul, to the beautiful but inanimate piece of marble beside her ?

The affection she had been so eager to offer, thrown back upon her poor aching heart, she too endeavoured to speak coldly and indifferently, though any body might have detected the unsuccessful acting, unless pre-determined to see her only in this character.

"I will not keep you up any longer, mamma. Your servant gave me a broad hint that I had disarranged the whole household—but I assure you the delay was quite unavoidable."

"We are such very early people here, Edith," was the reply, "that Hannah was doubtlessly a little put out by losing her rest. I feared you might have difficulty in finding the house, and so I sent her out about ten o'clock to see if there were any traces of you. She is, too, a very religious woman, and I believe thought it wrong

to spend Christmas Eve otherwise than in praying and singing psalms."

From this last speech Edith gathered one fact, which gave her much satisfaction, and that was—that Hannah, whatever other pretensions she might have, did not (as the daughter had begun to fear) govern her stately mistress.

"Good night, mamma," Edith now said, rising and taking a small lamp that stood ready for her on the table, "and I hope you will not sleep the worse for having been kept out of bed so much beyond your usual time."

"Good night, Edith. Your bed-room is on the nearest landing, to the right hand side."

A second embrace about as warm as the first had been, and then the daughter turned and left the room—feeling more desolate than ever orphan felt, more weary of life than any sorrow-stricken being that ever prayed to His Maker for death.

"I have *no mother!*" she said to her-

self, as without looking round her room, she sank upon the first chair that stood in her way, weeping at last with a passionate violence that threatened to destroy the slight, frail body shaken by that storm of woe.

CHAPTER III.


THE FIRST DAY AT WOODLEIGH COTTAGE.

IN spite of all her sorrows, past and present, Edith slept well that night, and everybody knows the effect of sound, unbroken rest upon the body and the mind. She awoke in the morning to hear the pleasant chiming of the Christmas bells, to gaze on the bright Christmas sun that streamed in cheerfully at her window, and to feel that she was still young enough and strong enough to battle a little longer

with that life which a few hours ago had appeared so wretched and insupportable.

At any rate she determined, come what might, to make the best of everything; and when people have the wisdom to form and adhere to a resolution like this, they cannot be very far from contentment, unless indeed those things on which they resolve to look cheerfully, turn out infinitely worse than human circumstances (viewed through the glass of patient resignation) usually do.

“If,” said Edith, speaking soberly and reasonably to herself, “if my mother has a heart—and I do think she has, in spite of all—why should I not succeed in winning it? I ought not to expect her to love me in a moment. We have been so long parted, and she cannot tell whether I am an angel or a demon yet. I will use every effort to gain her affection, for I feel already that I could love her so dearly and devotedly. If she questions me respecting my past life I will tell her every



thought, every feeling, and the pity my sorrows must inspire, may be a step towards the affection for which my heart is yearning. Dear, dear mother, you *shall* love your poor little Edith yet."

It was an immense relief to this poor little Edith to see, instead of the formidable Hannah, a neat, smiling young girl enter the room, and offer her services in the toilette duties, and though she declined these she could not resist the temptation of detaining the girl to ask a few questions concerning her mother's establishment, beginning like the church catechism with :—

"What is your name?"

"Mary, if you please ma'am," was the prompt reply.

"Well, Mary, and how long have you lived at Woodleigh Cottage?"

"Not much above a week ma'am—Missis told me when she hired me that I should only have a young lady to wait

upon, which of course ma'am is you—and I humbly hope I may give satisfaction."

"Of that I have no doubt, Mary," said Edith, kindly—"But do you not wait upon my mother also?"

"Oh dear no ma'am! Hannah does everything for missis; she can't abear any one else to take even a cup of tea to your mama. She's very jealous, ma'am, old Hannah is, but then she's been with missis this many year, I b'lieve."

"Then what have been your duties hitherto, Mary?" asked Edith, with increasing interest. "I suppose there are no other servants."

"Oh no, ma'am; Hannah is cook and house-maid, and lady's maid, and all. I have only had to get your rooms ready—to make chair covers, and hem curtains, and so on—I hope you like your rooms ma'am."

"Indeed, Mary," replied her new mistress, looking round for the first time on

all the little comforts and elegances that had been prepared for her. "I never saw anything nicer or prettier. Are my mother's own apartments furnished in this way?"

"Oh ma'am quite the reverse," said Mary eagerly, apparently delighted at an opportunity of communicating those circumstances that had probably struck her as mysterious in her "new place." "Your ma's rooms, ma'am, are just as plain as plain can be; not a bit smarter or more tasty than the one down stairs, that you must have seen last night."

"Well, Mary, you can go now," said Edith, thinking it imprudent to question the girl further. "If I should want you I will ring."

Left alone, she began to reflect intently on the information she had just gained, and to endeavour in some way to account for the apparent contradictions in her mother's household. The apartment into which she had been taken the preceding night

bespoke—if not actual poverty—at least very straitened means, while those destined for her own use contained every modern comfort and elegance that could possibly be desired. She certainly knew nothing of her mother's resources, but both Margaret and herself had conjectured that the relative with whom Mrs. Lascelles lived so many years, had left her well provided for. Edith feared it would be very long before she should dare to ask a question on this point ; but she resolved, from her own ample income, to supply her mother, by degrees, with all those comforts which she found lacking in the establishment.

This determination gave her much pleasure, and for the first time she felt the inestimable value of an independence such as she possessed ; for though she could not cheat herself into a belief that it was love which had prompted her mother's lavish liberality, in the adornment of her rooms, still there was something (contrasting too with the severe simplicity of her own) that

deeply touched the daughter's generous heart, and made her most anxious to give some proof of the sentiments of loving gratitude it had inspired.

On going down stairs Edith found breakfast laid for one only, and Hannah (who was busily engaged in shaking every particle of dust from the evergreens that hung round the room) informed her that Mrs. Lascelles always breakfasted in bed, but that she would be ready to accompany Mrs. Boisragon to church, at a quarter before eleven.

"How is mama, this morning?" said Edith, thinking she might have been permitted to take breakfast also in her mother's room.

"Much the same as usual," was the reply, delivered in the last night's voice. "She's none of the strongest, I can tell you, though she *does n't* look so puny and so baby-fied as others, maybe."

"I am sorry mama's health is not good;" Edith said, without noticing, except by a

slight smile, the old woman's impertinence. "Has she been delicate very long, Hannah?"

"I did n't say she was delicate, did I? You had better not be teasing missis about her health. She won't like it, I can tell you."

"I will make no allusion whatever to it, Hannah." Then, to change the subject, Edith continued—"I have not seen Nero this morning—has he had some breakfast?"

"About three times as much as a hard working Christian would eat—that's all. For my part I think it's a sin and a shame to keep them big, unmannerly dogs, when so many poor folks are starving."

Not feeling disposed to discuss this point with her present companion, Edith now sat down to her solitary breakfast, and Hannah soon after left the room.

At exactly a quarter before eleven a hired carriage drove up to the door, and then Mrs. Lascelles, leaning on the arm of

old Hannah, (who was also dressed for church) came slowly down the stairs, and greeted her daughter, who stood waiting for her in the hall, a shade more cordially, Edith fancied, than on the previous night.

"I concluded," the mother said, when they were all three seated in the carriage together, "that you would wish to go to church. But of course," (with a half mournful, half bitter smile), "in this and everything else, Edith, you are entirely your own mistress."

"I am glad to go to church, mama," was the low reply ; and as Mrs. Lascelles then turned from her to look into the street, Edith said nothing more, and perfect silence reigned till they arrived at the village church, which was a drive of about ten minutes from Woodleigh cottage.

At the conclusion of the service the same carriage was found waiting for them at the gates, and very little more conversation took place in returning, than that

which had enlivened them in going. On reaching home Edith sprang out first, that she might assist her mother in descending, but Hannah quite unceremoniously interposed, mumbling something about little people being only made to look at ; and the poor girl, unconscious that her mother had not observed what was passing, walked into the house, more disheartened and hopeless than ever.

Mrs. Lascelles, after changing her walking dress, joined her daughter in the parlour, where luncheon was now laid for them both. Edith thought her mother looked ill, but remembering Hannah's hint she did not like to make any observation on it, and she could only offer those little, quiet attentions, which when dictated by affection are ever so soothing and delightful to the recipient of them. Mrs. Lascelles appeared grateful, for Edith caught her mother's eyes several times fixed with a steadfast, and, as it seemed to her, indulgent gaze upon her face.

"She is trying to like me," thought the daughter ; and even this supposition was a source of consolation to her.

"By the bye, Edith," exclaimed Mrs. Lascelles, suddenly rousing herself from a deep reverie, "I forgot to mention that you will probably have visitors either to-day or to-morrow. It is about a fortnight ago that passing with Hannah through one of the bazaars, I was unfortunate enough to meet my cousin, Mrs. Armstrong. My veil was up, and she knew me at once. Since that, all the family have called (of course through curiosity alone) two or three times. I told them on their last visit, that I expected you, and they seemed most anxious (the young people at least) to renew their acquaintance with you."

Edith listened to this information with sentiments of unmingled annoyance. She did not like the Armstrongs ; between herself and them there existed not a single feeling in common. The girls were totally devoid of delicacy, and would no doubt by

their ill-judged questions probe all those wounds which were yet so sensitive and tender. Then poor Joseph, with his unfortunate passion, which she felt it would be more than impossible ever to return—how infinitely vexatious and painful it would be to have him coming at all times and seasons, claiming the leisure and attention, she had once, for the gratification of her own vanity, devoted to him.

“You do not appear pleased at the prospect of meeting your cousins again,” said Mrs. Lascelles, observing Edith’s clouded aspect. “Are they not amongst your favourites?”

“No, mama. Truly speaking they are not. I could have wished the renewal of our acquaintance deferred at least for some time—but it cannot of course be helped.”

“I am sorry,” said the mother, “since it is likely to annoy you.”

And there the subject dropped.

Several times during that day (and a

very long day it seemed) Edith endeavoured to lead the conversation, between her mother and herself, to those topics she was anxious to discuss ; but Mrs. Lascelles studiously shunned all reference to her daughter's past life, as well as to her own present resources. When Edith, with a view of leading to this latter point, mentioned that she had twelve thousand pounds and that she should never know how to spend the interest of it while she remained her mother's guest, Mrs. Lascelles said hastily—

“Don't spend it at all, my dear. You may be glad of the increase by and bye. But these are matters that I am not fond of discussing.”

Edith silently asked herself what were the matters that *they might* discuss ; but she was not long left in doubt on this subject. Mrs. Lascelles had a highly cultivated mind, and as she became more at home with her daughter, the latter discovered that she had the power of making herself the most charming companion in the

world. There were abundance of books at Woodleigh Cottage, and poor Edith, at the close of that first day, felt that only love and mutual confidence were wanting to make the present bright enough to atone for much of the regretted past.

But without this love she knew that every day would be to her a weary one, and all the intellectual resources, with which a mortal being could be gifted, but so much vanity and vexation of spirit.

It was a positive relief to Edith to escape from the cold, half furnished room down stairs (where old Hannah on some pretence or another was constantly intruding) to the comforts of her own little private snug-gery, where a bright fire and Mary's cheerful face awaited her.

"This is really charming," she said, sinking amongst the soft cushions of a luxurious arm chair. "Now Mary, let my poor old Nero come and see me, for I have scarcely spoken to him to-day."

Mary hastened to execute this order ;

but as she brought in the dog, who sprang joyfully to his young mistress, she could not help exclaiming, with a little smile of triumph—

“Oh ma’am, what would old Hannah say?”

CHAPTER V.

THE WICKED FAIRY.

THE following morning, while Edith was busy in her own rooms, unpacking and arranging the things which had arrived from her late home, the sour visage of Mrs. Hannah suddenly presented itself at the door.

"You're wanted down stairs, ma'am," she said, in her severest tone. "*My* missis (with a marked emphasis on the pronoun) is n't well enough to see company, and you're to tell them so."

"Who are they?" Edith asked, not yet knowing the limit of her mother's acquaintances.

"Your cousins, I b'lieve. Two fine looking, stout ladies, and a young gentleman who looks as if he wrote all the poetry that my missis reads—and that's a pretty lot, I can tell you." Edith smiling to herself at this description of cousin Joseph, went down stairs with anything but pleasurable feelings to receive her visitors.

Louisa and Martha appeared to have undergone little change, either in face or manner. Their figures were a trifle stouter, and their dress, if possible, a trifle smarter than before, but they met Edith as though they had parted from her only yesterday, and immediately commenced an account of their winter gaieties, and the different balls and assemblies they had in view for the coming season.

Joseph, however, was decidedly changed, and Edith saw at a glance what Hannah had so oddly described. He had lost all

his ruddy colour, and gained—if not precisely a sentimental look—at least a look of such determined gravity that in so young a man might easily have been mistaken for the result of a romantic or sentimental nature. He received Edith with very evident emotion, but all so quietly and unobtrusively expressed, that she was most agreeably surprised, and would gladly, had the sisters allowed her, have left them to their own resources, and addressed herself altogether to him.

But neither Louisa nor Martha had the least intention of permitting any such monopoly; they came prepared to talk, and talk they would, whether their conversation appeared to interest their listeners or not. So having exhausted the topics nearest to their own hearts, that is to say, their own personal affairs, they fell back upon those of Edith and her mother.

“Only to think,” said Louisa, “of your finding a mother after all. I declare it’s quite like a novel. Japhet in search of a

father, you know, and oceans more whose names I can't remember. Mrs. Lascelles is a beauty too, which makes it more romantic. I daresay now you'll both marry again."

Before Edith could reply to this pretty speech, Martha had eagerly availed herself of her sister's momentary pause to say—

"But do tell me, Edith, why neither your mamma nor yourself wear widow's caps. It seems so droll to us, and if you went into society, oh dear me! what would people not say about you."

"For myself," replied Edith, quietly, "I consider the circumstances attending my marriage as sufficient reason for not assuming a head-dress that is at all times conspicuous, and would be peculiarly so on such a very young-looking woman as I am. For my mother I really cannot answer, as it is a question I should never presume to ask."

"Oh dear me, then I suppose I have

done wrong, but I'm sure I didn't mean it," said Patty, becoming very red, and then to change the conversation, continuing, as she looked round the room,

"What a particularly pretty and tasteful effect those evergreens have, hanging all round the walls. Don't you admire it now beyond everything, Edith?"

"No," said Edith, "I do not admire it at all in such profusion as this. I conclude it was arranged thus by my mother's old servant, who appears to be an original." Then turning to Joseph she continued—"By-the-bye I daresay you can assist me in accomplishing an object that I have in view. It strikes me that a few good paintings would have a much prettier effect on these bare walls, that old Hannah's Christmas ornaments; and if you know of any place where such things are to be purchased, I should really be greatly obliged to you if you would go there with me, or undertake the commission alone."

"Oh!" exclaimed both the sisters,

"Joseph would be a pretty one to choose paintings. I'm sure you'd better go with him, Edith."

Joseph replied that he should have much pleasure either in accompanying Mrs. Boisragon, or in purchasing the pictures for her, for though he modestly acknowledged he could not depend on his own taste or judgment, he would get a friend to choose them if Edith preferred not going herself.

Edith, rather astonished at the apparent indifference he manifested, said she would decide on going herself; and the following morning was fixed for the expedition.

Before the conclusion of this very tedious visit, Louisa Armstrong delivered a message from her mamma to the effect that she should be most happy to see Mrs. Lascelles and Mrs. Boisragon to dinner, *in a quiet way*, on the succeeding Sunday.

"I think," replied Edith, with a suddenly kindling cheek, "I may venture to decline for both mamma and myself. We have no

intention at present of visiting, either in a *quiet* or any other way."

Soon after this, the party rose to take leave, and Edith devoutly hoped that the "fine stout ladies," at any rate, would not condescend to renew their pilgrimage to Hampstead for many a long day.

It was not till dinner-time that Mrs. Lascelles left her room, and then her daughter was painfully struck by the appearance of suffering so strongly displayed in her countenance.

"I fear, mamma, you have a head-ache," she said, arranging the cushions on the sofa, and offering a bottle of strong essence that always stood on the mantel-piece.

"No, Edith," replied the mother, declining the salts and seating herself at the table, "I have no head-ache. Do not make me fancy myself an invalid."

During dinner Edith spoke of her morning visitors, and mentioned the invitation she had ventured to decline.

"You were perfectly right," said Mrs.

Lascelles, "as far as I am concerned. But pray, Edith, never think of denying yourself any amusement on my account."

The daughter looked pained, and the mother observing this, added quickly—

"You know, my dear, we are yet almost strangers to each other; and you must not be wounded if I sometimes, through ignorance, attribute to you feelings which you do not possess."

How ardently Edith longed to say—"Why are we strangers to each other, mama." But "mama" was now looking down into her plate, and those beautiful, marble features were fixed in the stillness of perfect repose.

The evening passed much in the same manner that the last had done—books and literature forming the chief topics of conversation; and precisely at ten o'clock Hannah brought in the bed-room lamps, and the mother and daughter parted like two common acquaintances whom circumstances had thrown together, but who

were united by no ties, either of kindred or affection.

The following morning, punctually at the appointed hour, arrived cousin Joseph with a carriage for Mrs. Boisragon, and the first civility Edith had received from old Hannah was on this occasion, when the latter pressed forward to offer an additional shawl for her feet, and to wish them both a pleasant drive.


Instead, however, of being gratified at this unexpected attention, Edith remarked it with a sensation of pain, believing it to have originated in a feeling of pleasure at getting rid of her for a few hours, and not being able to avoid identifying her mother's sentiments with those of her evidently favourite and confidential servant.

Joseph appeared to much greater advantage without his sisters, than he had done with them, and though there was nothing striking or brilliant in his conversation—there was a kindness, a delicacy, and a general tone of sound English sense,

that pleased as much as it astonished Edith, who had been accustomed to consider him only in the light of a well-meaning, but rather empty-headed, love-sick boy.

Well-meaning he still was, but empty-headed could no longer, with justice, be applied to him, and though he was singularly grave and quiet, there was little appearance of love-sickness, either in his aspect or manner. Altogether, Mrs. Boisragon rather enjoyed both her drive and her companion ; and having purchased the pictures, she returned home, feeling a little more cheered in spirits than she had done since her arrival at Hampstead.

The next morning, before Mrs. Lascelles came down, and while Edith knew that Hannah was employed in dressing her mistress, she had all the paintings brought into the room, and assisted by Mary, (who seemed to derive extraordinary pleasure from the occupation) she had soon cleared the walls of the dark evergreens, and



replaced them by her own really beautiful purchases.

"Oh dear, ma'am, it do look something like now," said the girl, surveying the greatly improved apartment with delighted eyes. "But, oh my! won't old Hannah be mad—that's all."

"Surely," replied Edith, "she will be pleased if my mother likes them. I do believe her to be sincerely attached to her mistress—don't you, Mary?"

"Oh yes, ma'am; there's no doubt that the old woman's very fond of your ma, in her way; but it's a nasty, jealous way to my mind, and I don't think much of such love."

"Yet we must not judge her too severely, Mary. It is natural to some people to be jealous of those to whom they are warmly attached."

"May be so, ma'am; but I can't like old Hannah's ways for all that. She's so close, too, and scarcely ever speaks a word except to herself."



"I fear then, Mary, you find it dull here," said Edith, dreading to hear that she was destined to lose her nice, pleasant-looking little attendant.

"Why, ma'am, there's no denying that it's far from a lively place, especially as old Hannah mostways sits and cries whenever she's been longer than usual with her missis. But you see, ma'am, I'm gay-like by nature, and I don't seem to mind it as some might."

"Well, Mary, I am glad you do not," Edith answered. "And now, throw that green stuff into one of the empty grates for the present, as Hannah may like it for her kitchen. And you shall come out with Nero and me for a walk."

It was a fine, clear, frosty day, and the sun was shining pleasantly on the wide and picturesque heath. But Edith was thinking so much about her pictures, that she soon left Mary and Nero to enjoy their ramble alone, and returned to the cottage, eager to witness the effect of the agreeable

surprise she imagined she had prepared for her mother.

Without taking off her walking dress, she went at once towards the parlour, fancying she heard voices in that direction ; but arriving at the door, she paused, for one moment, feeling certain that she could distinguish sobs mingled with tones of angry grief. The temptation to listen was very strong indeed, but Edith resisted it, and opening the door gently, went in.

The scene, (to an uninterested spectator) would have been an amusing one. Mrs. Lascelles was lying on the sofa, looking really distressed and unhappy, while, at a short distance, stood Hannah (more like a wicked fairy than ever) sobbing violently, and making angry and hideous faces at the unconscious pictures. Edith's entrance, far from interrupting, seemed to give a new impetus to her rage and indignation.

"Yes," she was saying, in her very bitterest tones. "It's for this then that a poor body, whose old bones want extra

rest, got up at five o'clock in the morning, and walked miles and miles in the hardest frost that was ever knowed, to find holly and ivy for her missis's room, because, old as she is, she wouldn't let people she serves be eheated by them rascals of green-grocers, and because she knew it would be a sin and a shame to pass the blessed Christmas without its proper decorations. It's to see all the fruits of her labour throwed aside as dirt, to give place to them trumpery and profane picters ; that's what the old woman did it for ; and that's what the world's come to. The faithful love of long years goes for nothing in these days ; so the sooner some people is laid under the sod the better."

Mrs. Lascelles had grown very pale, and Edith, taking advantage of Hannah's pausing for breath, advanced to her mother's side, and said, earnestly—

"Dear mama, I am, beyond expression, vexed at having excited such a storm as this. I had, of course, no idea how those

evergreens were obtained, and my only object was to give you a little surprise, by decorating your room with a few pictures that I hoped you would do me the kindness of accepting."

To Hannah she said, coldly—

"I am sorry to have hurt your feelings ; but, I think, if your love for your mistress were really sincere, you would avoid giving her the unnecessary pain you are doing now."

"My dear Edith," exclaimed her mother, in a faint voice, "I am not indifferent to your kindness and generosity ; but you are unjust to poor Hannah, who, though, perhaps, over zealous, at times, does love me sincerely and faithfully, and has done so (as she truly says) for long years."

Edith's heart swelled within her, and acting upon the first impulse of her deeply wounded feelings, she turned and left the room, and remained in her own till dinner time.

When she went down again, her mother

received her gravely, but made no allusion to the morning's scene. Edith observed, however, that the evergreens hung in their old places, and that her pictures had been taken quite away.

"It is enough," she said to herself, as she bent, with tearful eyes, over her untasted dinner. "Henceforth I shall make no useless efforts to gain admittance into a heart that so resolutely shuts me out. I shall pursue my own course, and cherish no more hopes or fears, connected with my cold and incomprehensible mother."


That evening, pleading a head-ache, she went to her own room, and wept till her excuse became a most painful reality, while Nero, stretched at her feet, whined in intelligent sympathy, and seemed as weary of Woodleigh cottage as his unhappy mistress.

CHAPTER VI.

INCREASING MYSTERY.

IN spite of Edith's resolution to pursue her own course, and give up exciting herself about her mother, there were circumstances that, through Mary, occasionally came to her knowledge, which not only prevented her doing this, but increased, to a very painful degree, the interest and curiosity Mrs. Lascelles had, from the first, inspired in her daughter's mind.

One of these occurred soon after the affair of the pictures.



Edith had gone out early in the morning, telling her mother that she should probably be absent till their usual dinner hour, as she had felt unwell for several days, and intended with Nero to take a long drive into the country. Finding, however, that it grew too cold for enjoyment, she returned earlier than she had anticipated, and enquiring for her mother was informed by Mary, who was alone in the house, that Mrs. Lascelles and Hannah had gone out in a carriage together soon after her own departure.

"How very strange," said Edith, speaking more to herself than to the girl; but Mary eagerly took advantage of this opening to offer her own remarks on the subject.

"Yes, ma'am, it is strange; but it's not the first time. Twice before you came, they went out for the morning—and both times old Hannah cried for more than an hour in the kitchen after they came home."

"She had, probably, displeased her mis-

dress," said Edith, who suddenly recollected what she had formerly heard of her mother's violent temper. "But, Mary, these things do not concern us, and we have no right to discuss them."

When Mrs. Lascelles returned, she seemed annoyed to find that Edith had arrived before her; but her manner was unusually kind and affectionate that evening; and more than once, her daughter detected tears in her eyes, when she thought herself unobserved.

The next piece of information that Edith gained, affected her in a greater degree than this.

From the very first, Hannah had thrown out disagreeable hints whenever she saw Mrs. Boisragon alone, respecting poor Nero's appetite, and the money his living cost. Now, Edith would have been too glad to have paid this herself, but she dared not offer it, lest it should come to her mother's knowledge, and give her pain. So, at last, quite wearied with the old woman's grum-

blings, and seeing too that Mrs. Lascelles, though she tolerated him in the house, never liked the dog to come near her, Edith, at a considerable sacrifice of her own inclinations, resolved to ask Joseph Armstrong to take charge of her favorite till she had a home of her own (which, if things did not improve at Woodleigh Cottage, she thought would possibly soon occur.)

“Well, ma’am, I’m so glad,” said the kind-hearted Mary, when her mistress communicated to her this intention. “For really, old Hannah has such a spite against the poor, innocent animal, that I’m sure if it wasn’t for your ma he’d have been starved to death by this time.”

“You think, then, that mama gave her strict orders about feeding him, Mary?” said Edith, somewhat surprised at this observation.

“La, ma’am, your ma knew old Hannah better, I should think, than to stop at that. Why, there’s scarce a day, since you’ve been

here, that she hasn't, at one time or another, come into the kitchen and fed him with the best of meat herself ; and oh dear ! isn't Hannah mad when she sees her missis doing it ; but most often your ma comes when she's out of the way ; and once, ma'am, (I hope no offence, but I couldn't help crying when I heard it, ma'am), your ma didn't see me as I was stooping down cleaning the meat-screen, and she said, as she gave the dog a beautiful mutton-bone ; 'Happy Nero ! *you've* something to live for ; so eat away, old fellow,' or some such word as that, ma'am."

Edith made no remark to Mary on this anecdote, but she pondered upon it long and deeply herself, and arrived at last at the conclusion that her mother had some concealed cause of grief, of which Hannah alone was the confidante. Could it be an attachment that circumstances forbade her indulging, or of which she had any reason to be ashamed ? Those mysterious drives

that Mary had mentioned, coupled with the old servant's tears, seemed to encourage this supposition ; but Edith tried to drive away the thought as an unworthy one, and regretted that it had ever occurred to her. For the more she knew of her mother the more she felt constrained to esteem and admire her ; and the more her heart yearned for that love which appeared to fly farther and farther, as she pursued it.

In other respects they got on pretty well together, and could Edith have made up her mind to exist contentedly without affection or confidence, her present life might have been tolerably happy. Mrs. Lascelles omitted nothing that she fancied could contribute to her daughter's comfort or pleasure in any way. Discovering accidentally that she was fond of music, a piano was immediately ordered, and placed in Edith's room ; and when the latter (who had only refrained from purchasing one for herself lest her mother might not like it) hinted delicately that she must be allowed to pay

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the hire, Mrs. Lascelles looked so much hurt, and spoke so decidedly, that her daughter never ventured to renew the proposition, although she guessed from the ill-temper and muttered insinuations of old Hannah, on the arrival of the instrument, that it was an extravagance her mother's income did not warrant.

Mrs. Lascelles expressed, however, and seemed really to feel, such gratification in hearing her daughter play (she could not make up her mind to sing at present) that Edith soon forgot everything else, in the delight of being able to please her melancholy companion ; and in less than a week after it had entered the house, the piano was transferred to the usual sitting-room, and brought into very active service during the long winter evenings.

The only visitor they ever had was Joseph Armstrong, and he made the guardianship of Nero an excuse for coming more frequently than Edith quite approved. But he was really so quiet and unobtrusive,

so ready to perform any trifling service either of the ladies required, and above all so free from the slightest symptoms of his former passion, that it would have appeared ridiculous to make objections to his visits. Mrs. Lascelles rather liked him too, and in their exceedingly quiet and monotonous life, an occasional guest, with whom they both felt perfectly at home, was not unwelcome ; so cousin Joseph came at last to be considered quite a privileged person, and even Hannah would say, if so much as three evenings passed without seeing him at the cottage—

“ I hope nothing’s happened to the young gentleman,” or, “ What can be the matter that Mr. Joseph hasn’t been ? ”

When the days began to get a little longer, Edith would sometimes, but not often, take short walks with him and Nero into the country ; and these seasons she generally enjoyed, as she could speak unreservedly to Joseph about her still beloved sister, and Nettia, and Mrs. Boisragon,

and the old times at Fernley—subjects which with her mother she had never, after the first unsuccessful attempt, ventured to enter upon. Edith, accustomed from her childhood, to tell every thought to Margaret, could not, all at once, acquire habits of reserve, and as time softened the extreme poignancy of her regrets, she felt a strong necessity for giving occasional expression to her feelings—for speaking openly of those events which had been for so long the grim phantoms of her memory alone.

Joseph Armstrong was assuredly not the confidante she would have selected, had a choice been offered her ; but this not being the case, Edith soon discovered that he was both a kind and a sympathizing one, and by degrees she began to find a consolation in his society, that she was astonished at herself, but which had in truth no deeper source than her conviction of the sincerity of the interest he expressed—expressed not so much by flattering words, as by an

ever ready and fixed attention, and not unfrequently a moistened eye.

Mrs. Lascelles made no remark to her daughter on this growing intimacy, but Edith fancied that because old Hannah seemed delighted at it, her mother must be the same, and many a pang shot through her own warm heart, in reflecting that her society had become positively disagreeable to that one, whom above all others, she now desired to please.

Since the unfortunate paintings which had occasioned such a ridiculous scene, Edith had not ventured upon any other present ; she waited to find out what would be most acceptable, and what she could offer without paining or offending her mother. Not once since her arrival had she been invited to go into the private apartments of the latter, which were always locked when Mrs. Lascelles went from home. This struck Edith as strange ; and she resolved to find out the reason of it on the first opportunity.

One day when Hannah had gone out early in the morning before her mistress had risen, Edith went up boldly and knocked (precisely in the old servant's manner) at her mother's door.

"Come in," was the immediate reply ; and without waiting for a second permission, Edith entered softly, and advancing to the bedside, began explaining rather nervously the reason of her intrusion (some trifling matter that could easily have been deferred a few hours longer, but which she thought might serve as an excuse for her unusual visit.)

Mrs. Lascelles looked for a moment angry and indignant. The daughter prepared herself for reproaches and immediate dismissal at the least ; but the threatened storm passed over, like a summer cloud, and the mother kissed with more than ordinary tenderness, her pale and half frightened looking child, bidding her however return to the warm sitting room where she would quickly join her.

Edith obeyed instantly, but she had observed, during the short time she remained in the room, that it was not only destitute of every species of luxury and ornament (such as her own apartments were filled with) but that it contained scarcely common comforts, and had a most chill, uninviting, and wretched appearance.

This then was the reason she had been so studiously kept out. Her mother (as she had previously suspected) denied herself all those little comforts which are so especially essential to invalids, that she might bestow really useless luxuries and elegances upon her daughter—a daughter too whom she could not bring herself to love. “This,” thought poor Edith, crying heartily when she got down stairs. “This is the compensation she wishes to make me. But oh mother, mother, one look, one word of warm affection would be worth far more than all your generous gifts, would be worth all the riches of the world to me.”

The next day when Joseph called to take his cousin for a walk, she made him go into town with her and assist in choosing several articles of furniture for her mother's room.

The most luxurious and elegant that could be obtained, Edith bought, and this time she had the discretion to take old Hannah into her confidence, who, either flattered at being consulted, or really pleased on her mistress's account, evinced considerable satisfaction on the occasion, and even contrived to twist her hideous features into something as near like a smile, as such features could assume. By her manoeuvring Mrs. Lascelles was induced to go out for a short drive on the following morning, and during her absence Edith and the two servants, assisted by the man who brought the furniture, arranged everything to their entire satisfaction, and converted a very miserable, desolate looking room, into a very delightful and tempting place indeed.

But there was an inner apartment which Edith had not yet seen, and while Hannah's back was turned she opened the door and went in. It was very small, and contained only an old-fashioned *prie-Dieu*, on which lay a bible with two or three other devotional books; and hanging above this the pictures which she had purchased for her mother, but which she had never enquired about from then till now, believing Hannah had condemned them to perpetual obscurity and disgrace.

This latter personage now discovering where Edith was, came grumbling angrily into the little room.

"You'd better hasten out of that, and not be thinking of putting any of your fine things there. We shall all catch it enough as it is, but hanging wouldn't be half bad enough for them as meddled with that room, I can tell you."

Edith's feelings were too powerful to allow of her asking any questions, although

her conjectures on the subject were vague, contradictory, and tantalizing beyond expression. Pleasure, however, and a pleasure to which she had long been a stranger, mingled with all she felt; and made her long impatiently for some further proofs of that which for the first time she had dared even to believe possible.

When Mrs. Lascelles came home, Edith was in her own room, and waiting till her mother had passed with Hannah, she went out softly and stood on the landing, to see if she could hear what was passing above; for though this was a small matter in itself, the daughter could not help feeling tremblingly anxious concerning the effect her gifts might produce.

She had heard the door open and shut again, and then there seemed to come a long pause. She supposed her mother was recovering from her surprise, or examining her possessions, or waiting for some explanation from her companion—an expla-

nation that seemed at length to be given, for Edith could plainly distinguish the old woman's voice, modulated as it always was when she spoke to her mistress, but modulated it appeared in vain at present. For a storm succeeded, a torrent of violent and passionate words, a perfect hurricane of anger that reached Edith like the mutterings of a fierce tempest, ever coming nearer and nearer, and sent her pale and trembling into her room again, there to await the elucidation of this new mystery, with what patience she could command.

At the end of nearly half an hour old Hannah knocked at the door, and, on permission being eagerly given, entered with rather a savage look, and told Edith she was to go to her mother.

"I hope mamma is not angry, Hannah?" (This was said very timidly, and with rather a conscious face.)

"I told you some of us would catch it," was the snappish and unsatisfactory answer. "But I'm not a going to answer any

questions, and you'd better do as you're bid at once."

Edith, having an idea that this was good advice, hastened up stairs and presented herself before her mother, who was standing in the middle of the room, looking perhaps a little paler than usual, but exhibiting no other sign of more than ordinary emotion. She advanced to meet Edith, and folded her in her arms ere there was time to say a word. But on her daughter beginning to sob, she said in a low, firm, but certainly tender voice.

"Edith, on one condition only will I accept these costly things, and that is that you never again while we are together, be the time long or short, spend a shilling of your money on me. It is because I feel your generosity so deeply, that I make these arbitrary conditions—and now, it is for you to decide."

Not a hint of the recent storm, not a single word relating to the favourite's disgrace; nothing but this quiet expression of

her decision, and the thanks implied in that first affectionate caress.

"Of course, dear mamma," Edith replied, "I have no choice but to obey you in making the promise; but to this obedience let me add a petition too. Let me sometimes sit with you in this room when you are unable to come down, and let me try at least to perform for you some of those trifling services, which Hannah alone has hitherto been privileged to do."

Mrs. Lascelles looked at her daughter, whose sweet, earnest face, was raised anxiously to her own. For a few minutes she made no reply, but her colour ~~was~~ varying rapidly, and her eyes were fast filling with tears.

At length she said, in an excessively tremulous voice—

"You are very good and kind, my dear, but I cannot have you wait upon me!"

Then placing her hand on her daughter's head, and still gazing down through her

quickly falling tears into that youthful but sorrowful face, she murmured half to herself, as if the words were a part of some dream she was dreaming,

“ My little Edith !”

CHAPTER VII.

A GLEAM OF SUNSHINE.

THE fountain had given forth sweet waters at last ; and Edith's dreams that night were happy ones. It was impossible to doubt any longer, that she was an object of powerful interest, if not yet of positive love, to her mother ; and this conviction filled her heart with a gladness that only those can understand who have yearned, like her, for human sympathy and affection. She did not care to enquire into any of the

apparent mysteries now: the "wicked fairy" was no longer a person of importance in her eyes; all and everything that had been a source of unhappiness to her, seemed to vanish as if by the wand of an enchanter, leaving nothing but the words, "my little Edith," and the soft tone that had accompanied them, to fill her thoughts and her heart with bright anticipations of the future—that future which had, hitherto, worn such a dull and leaden hue.

At a much earlier hour than usual on the following morning she was up and in the garden, searching amongst the multitude of weeds and dead leaves with which it was covered, for a few winter flowers, that she had seen peeping from the ground a few days ago. Having found and made them into a little nosegay, she went smilingly upstairs, and asked admittance to her mother's room. This was granted, after a short delay; but Hannah, who opened the door, enjoined the utmost quiet, as Mrs.

Lascalles had passed a very bad night, and was now suffering from a severe headache.

Edith laid her little offering on the pillow, and stooped to press her lips upon the pale cheek that was resting there. The mother smiled very faintly, but took the flowers, and seemed to hold them lovingly in her thin hand.

"They are deliciously sweet and fresh," she said, in a tired, languid voice. "No one but you, Edith, would have discovered them amongst such a wilderness of weeds."

"Are you fond of flowers, mama?"

"Very ; though you would scarcely believe it, to look at my garden. It is quite a disgrace both to Hannah and me."

After a little more conversation, Mrs. Lascalles complained of so much fatigue, that Edith was obliged to leave her ; and, at a later hour of the day, she grew worse, and a physician who had before attended her was sent for. He remained a considerable time

with his patient ; and Edith, who had been waiting anxiously for his coming out, met him at the bottom of the stairs, and enquired eagerly what he thought of her mother's illness.

For a minute or two he stood still, looking with evident interest and astonishment at the speaker, and this look said, too, very plainly,

"Who are you?" for Edith had mentioned his patient only as Mrs. Lascelles.

"Pray, give me your candid opinion," she repeated, in an excited voice. "It is my mother that I am anxious about."

"Oh!" said the doctor, and then paused again, as if that single word had contained a very valuable opinion. But recollecting probably that this had been less clear to his listener than to himself, he presently added—

"Keep away from your mother, young lady, if you want her to get well. I wonder whether there are any women in the

moon or the other planets that are not excitable."

This last observation was supposed to be a soliliquy—at the conclusion of which he patted Edith on her shoulder, as he would have done a little child, and without another word, departed.

During all that week he came daily to see Mrs. Lascelles, and though Edith constantly way-layed him as he passed out of her mother's room, she never succeeded in extracting a more satisfactory answer than he had given the first day—only once, when she changed the form of her enquiries, and said, plainly,

"Do you think there is any danger?" he smiled grimly, and patting her familiarly under the chin, (he was a perfect giant of a man) said,

"Pooh—pooh, women excite themselves about nothing."

This "nothing," however, as he called it, was made of sufficient importance to keep Edith away from her mother, and she would

have found now the time hang very heavy on her hands, if it had not been for cousin Joseph, and a new occupation that these two pursued diligently together. It was the putting in order of the long neglected garden—a task that Edith had resolved on accomplishing before Mrs. Lascelles saw it again, and which the hope of giving pleasure to that more than ever beloved mother, made a most delightful and exhilarating employment to her.

It was now nearly the end of March, and the rapidly lengthening days were often brightened by the sweet sunshine, which cheered the young labourers at their work, and gave them an idea of what the little garden would be when the summer sun shone down upon it, and opened the flowers they were now planting with such zeal and care—flowers which Joseph presented to the garden, because Edith was bound, by her tiresome promise, to make no more purchases for her mother—and because her fellow labourer, having made

no such promise, took an especial delight in filling his large pocket with roots and seeds every time he came to the cottage.

And so they worked away, sometimes assisted by Mary, and often (while Mrs. Lascelles was sleeping) superintended by Hannah herself ; and, at length, it was all completed for the present, and the first soft April shower brought forth a whole legion of sweet and fragrant buds, that Edith seized upon at once, and formed into a bouquet for the invalid.

Except for a few minutes every morning, she had not seen her mother since the commencement of her illness ; but this day she begged so hard to be allowed to go in and take the flowers, that Hannah, after the doctor's visit, consented to admit her.

Mrs. Lascelles received her daughter kindly—she was always kind and affectionate now, though the demonstrative tenderness of that one day had never since been repeated.

“Your flowers are beautiful, Edith,” she

said, "and I am longing more than I can tell you to go down again, and see the transformation you have effected in my poor garden."

"It is nothing yet, mama; but in the summer, I hope you will both admire and enjoy it. We have contrived a sort of bower where you are to sit in an easy chair, while I read to you, or work by your side."

A peculiar expression, certainly of pain, appeared for a moment on the mother's face, and she turned to Hannah (who was standing near) with what Edith thought a significant look.

"You had better go down again now, ma'am," said the old servant. "Your mama can't bear all this chattering yet."

As Mrs. Lascelles did not contradict this assertion, Edith reluctantly obeyed, though she could not help feeling it very hard that she should see so little of her mother.

A few days later, her thoughts were, for a time, turned into a totally different

direction, by the receipt of the following letter from Margaret :

“ My own dear Edith,”

“ You will not, I fancy, be surprised to learn that everything is at length settled, and that I am to become the wife of Mr. Howard on the 29th of this month. It is, of course, much earlier than I had at first wished or intended, after our recent loss. But I think the circumstances of the case justify a departure from the ordinary rules. The fact is, our parish is so extensive, and Charles is so much more conscientious than the late rector, that he is working himself to death, and it is the general opinion, that unless he shortly obtains assistance in visiting the poor, superintending the schools, &c., &c., he will become seriously ill. I will not enter into further particulars now, as I hope you will not refuse the request I am going to make. It is, dearest Edith, that you will come to my

quiet wedding, and spend a week or two with our kind friends at the cottage, who desire me to say you would confer the greatest pleasure on them by so doing. For myself, I have quite set my heart upon having you. I should not fancy the wedding complete without my sweet little sister to grace it, and though I am certain you will consider the earnestness of my wish a sufficient inducement for you to comply with it, I may mention also, that Miss Egerton has half promised to come, and that there will not be a single stranger of the party.

“With fondest love to yourself, and best regards to your mother,

“Believe me, my dearest Edith,

“Your ever devoted sister,

“MARGARET LASCELLES.”

Edith paused for a moment after reading

this letter to ask herself if she really wished to accept the invitation ; then, ashamed of the doubt, as recollections of the unvarying fondness of her "dear, good Margey," arose in her mind, she sought old Hannah, and told her that she must be allowed immediately to see her mother for a few minutes.

"You don't want to be flustering and worritting her as you did the other day, I should *think*," was the reply to this petition, delivered in the fairy's harshest voice.

"No, no, Hannah," said Edith, rather impatiently. "I only want to tell mama that I am going away, for a short time, if she does not mind it."

The change that came over the old woman's face was perfectly startling, and Edith, who had imagined she had become a greater favourite lately with her mother's servant, was considerably puzzled to account for this unmistakeable expression of satisfaction.

"Come along then," Hannah said, in the

most bland and gracious tones; "only you mustn't talk too much to Missis.

There was no fear of this; for when Edith discovered, by the manner in which her mother received the communication she came to make, that her satisfaction nearly equalled that testified by Hannah, the daughter felt little inclination to prolong the interview. And in the first impulse of her deeply wounded feelings, she almost resolved never to return to Woodleigh cottage again.

"What can it mean?" she said to herself again and again, during that day, and in the evening to Joseph Armstrong; but the latter appeared so bewildered by the intelligence of his cousin's intended departure, that he was quite unable to assist her in solving the enigma.

The next time the doctor came, Edith met him in the passage as usual, and after her customary questions, (which he still answered in the same unsatisfactory manner), she said—

"I am going away for a week or two. Take care of mama during my absence."

"I am *very* glad to hear it," he replied, emphatically. Then meeting her glance of surprise, he added. "It will do you a vast deal of good, my dear; mind you take care of yourself, and I will look after your mother."

"It is strange," thought poor Edith, with tears in her eyes after the doctor had gone. "Everybody seems glad to get rid of me; and yet I'm sure I have injured no one here."

She remembered later that cousin Joseph had appeared sorry, and he was welcomed that evening with more than usual pleasure and cordiality.

At length, the day fixed for her journey arrived, and having deferred taking leave of her mother till the last moment, she went into the room ready dressed, old Hannah passing out as she entered. Mrs. Lascelles was propped up in her bed with pillows, and she was looking excessively pale

and ill, so much so, that Edith felt quite alarmed, and eagerly enquired if she was worse?

"No, my dear," the mother answered, quickly, and holding out her hands to her daughter; "you must not judge of my health by my complexion. Do *you* feel quite well, Edith?"

"Quite, mama; but I shall be very anxious about you."

"Hannah shall write if I grow worse; but this is unlikely. And, Edith dear," drawing her closer and closer till her arms had encircled the slight, bending figure, and her daughter's head was resting on her bosom; "you will soon return to me. I shall miss you much, Edith, more than I tell you."

"Mama—my own mama, let me stay," sobbed Edith, equally surprised and affected at this return of tenderness, and clinging, in her fond, caressing way, to the speaker of those precious words.

"No, no—you must go," said Mrs. Las-

celles, with sudden energy. Then pressing Edith almost wildly to her heart, which was beating quick and impetuously, and murmuring a few low and tender blessings, that her daughter rather felt than heard, she released her abruptly from the embrace in which she had held her, and sank back, half fainting, on her pillows.

At this instant Hannah returned, and telling Edith she had done enough mischief, hurried her from the room, and nearly pushed her into the arms of cousin Joseph, who was waiting to hand her to the carriage.

CHAPTER VIII

THE COTTAGE GUESTS.

THE mild beams of an April sun were shining steadily into the little parlour of Fernley cottage—shining upon the pictured walls—and upon the bright gothic looking furniture—and upon the china vases, with their gayest of spring flowers—and upon three of the pleasantest, happiest faces that any sunbeams could ever shine upon.

The two dear old ladies, just the same as you last parted from them, and she, who

in one short week from this time, was to be a bride.

"Well, they could not have a finer day for travelling," said Miss Eliza, who had made the same observation at least fifty times since the morning. "I am sure," getting up, and walking to the window, (she had done nothing else since dinner) "I am sure it's exactly like a May evening, and, oh dear, I do wish they would arrive—poor things! how they must want their tea."

"I really think," said Margaret, smiling a little at the amiable spinster's restlessness, "that you are reckoning too fully on Miss Egerton's coming to-night. You know she was by no means certain as to the day she should be able to start; and, of course, the time of her arrival depends altogether on that."

"Oh, of course it does," replied Miss Eliza, sitting down again; "but, somehow, I have made up my mind that they will both come the same evening. Pretty dears!

they are sisters too now, and what could be more natural?"

Probably Margaret did not quite see the force of this reasoning, for another smile flitted across her very pleasant face, and then she got up and left the room, to give a final look at the apartment that had been prepared for her sister, and which joined and opened into her own."

"There goes as sweet a creature as ever lived, and as good," said Miss Cargill, as the door closed on Margaret. "There can be no doubt in the world that Charles Howard is a very fortunate man."

"So he is," replied Miss Eliza, returning once more to the window; "but then he really deserves a good wife—he is such a particularly charming person himself. Upon my word, one seldom sees a pair so nicely matched as these two will be. How I wish, Hannah, some other friends of ours had as bright a prospect before them."

"Ah, poor—poor Nettia," returned the

sister, with a tear twinkling in her kind eye. "Her's has been, indeed, a sad fate, and though I would not for the world blame anybody, it has always struck me, as perfectly unaccountable, that Stuart Bernarde, having won her affection, should ever have become indifferent to her."

"I am sure so it has me ; but then I don't profess to understand men in the least," said Miss Eliza, modestly, "and I do think, Hannah dear, that the more we see of them, the more thankful we ought to be, at having had nothing to do with them ourselves."

"Oh! I am far from regretting having remained single, Eliza, as you well know—but, at the same time, I do not wish to condemn the whole sex—and even, for Sir Stuart Bernarde, I have no doubt there were many, many excuses, if we could but know them. I never liked that young foreigner being so much with him, and Simeon goes so far as to attribute the whole mischief to him."

“ Well, it is impossible to say—and at all events, it is not just now, when he is overwhelmed with misfortunes, that we ought to be blaming poor Stuart. I really should like to see him again, Hannah.”

“ So should I—but, depend upon it, we never shall. I’m sure I don’t know what he’ll do, if he persists in refusing to take back the money he settled on his cousins. Oh, dear—oh dear! that gambling is such a shocking thing.”

“ Don’t let us talk about it now, Hannah—for it always makes me miserable; and I do want to look cheerful and happy all this week. Upon my honour, I wouldn’t look anything else while a wedding was going on for the whole world.”

“ Oh, dear me! I should think not—and I do hope, Eliza, you’ll make this a point of duty,” said Miss Cargill very seriously, forgetting that her sister had never looked otherwise than cheerful and happy for tea minutes together, since her teething time. But remember, my dear, that you are not

to say a word to Edith about Sir Stuart Bernarde, as Margaret thinks it best to avoid everything tending to recall the past; and of course, we have no means of knowing what her feelings are."

"Poor dear!" exclaimed Miss Eliza, "I'm sure I'd be the last to make her sad; but I must go now and take those tea cakes out of the oven—for I have just remembered that Nettia does not like them done quite brown."

By the time this little domestic duty was accomplished, Mr. Simeon, who had been walking up and down the garden, and in front of the house, all the afternoon, came in to announce that he heard carriage wheels in the distance. So Margaret was immediately summoned, and they all four went down to the gate, in a perfect fever of pleasurable excitement.

Their suspense was now of very short duration; for the vehicle rolled on quickly, turned into the lane where the cottage stood; and finally, stopping close to the

little gate, disclosed the altered, but still lovely face of Nettia Egerton, smiling cheerfully from the open window of the carriage.

The question now seemed, which should have the privilege of hugging her to death first ; but this point having, at length, been settled to the general satisfaction, and the weary traveller half smothered with embraces, they all went into the little parlour again, and kissed and cried for a good ten minutes longer ; till, in fact, Margaret considerably suggested that Nettia would feel more comfortable when she had changed her dress and taken a cup of tea.

It was decided now that they should not wait for Edith, as she could have a separate meal on her arrival ; and in another half hour they were all seated round the spinster's hospitable tea-table, doing ample justice to Miss Eliza's cakes, and everything else that her thoughtful kindness had provided for her favourites.

Of course, Nettia was expected to an-

swer two or three dozen questions at once; but finding this impossible, she very quietly said,

“ My dear aunts, I have no news of any kind—except that mama is much better ; and that she is to stay during my absence with the clergyman and his wife, who have been very, very kind to us throughout the winter. And now I must be allowed for the future, to subside into the character of a listener—for I am most anxious to hear all that concerns yourselves—and of course, the whole particulars of Margaret’s engagement.” Then turning to the latter, she continued, with an affectionate smile, “ I am sure, Mr. Howard must be a magician—for you look ten years younger than when I saw you last, and altogether, very, very charming.”

Margaret blushingly acknowledged this compliment, but she rather wished to avoid speaking of her own happiness, fearing Nettie might be led into painful reflections on the striking contrast in their destinies,

which were indeed almost reversed since their former meeting. But Nettia, whatever her secret feelings were, betrayed no symptom of any kind of suffering, and was scarcely less cheerful than in the old times, when her hopes were as bright and apparently as assured as those of Margaret, at present.

And the April sun streamed in upon them all, as they chatted pleasantly and sociably together ; and its cheering rays seemed to linger lovingly in that little room, and amongst those whose words and looks of love would have formed an atmosphere of sunshine, on the darkest winter's day.

Margaret grew slightly restless at last, because Edith had not arrived ; but while she was conjecturing anxiously as to the cause of the delay, Mr. Howard came in, and claimed her undivided attention. In the midst of the little bustle and confusion that his entrance occasioned (for the spinsters insisted on having another cup brought, and Miss Eliza must run and see

if there were any more of her famous cakes in the kitchen), nobody heard or noticed the stopping of a carriage at the gate, and when Edith, unannounced, walked into the room, there was a general start, and a look of surprise which for a moment struck a chill to her heart, and made her feel like an unwelcome stranger amongst them.

Of course after the first panic at her sudden apparition, the whole party vied with each other in welcoming and doing honour to this new guest ; but poor Edith, grown painfully sensitive of late, could not get over the former impression. It seemed to her (and there is no feeling more saddening than this) that she had no business here, that they had all been perfectly happy without her, that instead of adding to their enjoyment she should but cast a shadow upon it, and that in spirit, at least, she was certainly a stranger amongst them.

Even when seated at the table, between her kind sister and the friendly Eliza, with

Nettia looking volumes of affectionate interest, Edith could not rouse herself from the strange dejection that had fallen on her spirits ; and the rays of the rapidly sinking sun, that still streamed into the little parlour, had no longer only happy faces to shine upon; for the youngest and fairest face amongst them, had a dark cloud resting on it, that no external sunbeams could remove.

But genuine happiness and contentment are certainly contagious, and that sunshine of the heart which was so widely diffused amongst the smiling group around her, communicated, as the evening wore on, a portion of its own gladness to Edith. In contemplating the general cheerfulness she lost in some degree her own individuality, and though this secret of true wisdom was not familiar to her, she found (as all who try it must find) that it was one well worth the trouble of studying.

Miss Eliza Cargill had not exaggerated when she said that Charles Howard was a

particularly charming person, and Edith soon acknowledged to herself that he was worthy even of her own good Margey, who looked the picture of satisfaction, and a perfect beau ideal of a clergyman's wife.


Before Mr. Howard went away he made an arrangement to call on the following morning, for the purpose of conducting Nettia and Edith to see the rectory—Margaret's future home—which Miss Eliza assured them was a complete little paradise. This last mentioned lady had been the principal talker throughout the evening, and her last observation before they all separated, delivered too in a most triumphant tone, was—

“ Well now, you see I was right about these two dear girls coming together—and I declare I think it was the most natural thing in the world.”

CHAPTER IX.

A VISIT TO THE RECTORY.

MARGARET and Edith had a great deal of conversation that night, and many tears were shed by both sisters, as they confided to each other all that had occurred to them since they parted—with their hopes and fears for the time to come. But Margaret's anticipations were of course all bright ones ; she had built her happiness upon a rock, which life's storms would have no power to shake. Her great anxiety at pre-



sent was for her sister, for that beloved sister, whom she had watched and prayed for during so many years, but whose course seemed destined now to lead down another current, and a current that in all probability would run far apart from her own. She was puzzled by Edith's account of her mother, and inclined in her secret heart to attribute the inconsistency of her conduct to caprice. But to this idea she gave no expression, being desirous rather of inspiring her young sister with hopefulness, than of increasing the despondency she could not fail to perceive.

It was a great pleasure to Edith this privilege of opening her whole heart again, as in days gone by, to one of whose sympathy she was so well assured, and she would willingly have passed the night, talking and listening to her dear Margey—but this dear Margey fortunately knew better than to allow it, so, when midnight sounded from the village clock, she kissed the pale cheek and steadily resisted the pleading eye ; and

Edith was sent to bed with no pleasanter prospect than to count the strokes of that same loud tongued clock, during the weary hours she knew she should lie awake.

Her appearance in the morning bore ample testimony to the wretched night she had passed, and the kind old ladies and Nettia did all in their power to cheer and amuse her mind, rightly conjecturing that this was not yet at peace. But although not a fault could be found with their manner towards her, which was in truth dictated by the very spirit of kindness, poor Edith could not help fancying that there was an effort in it, that everybody took too much pains to please her, conveying thereby the impression that they feared she would be on the watch for petty slights and neglects, because she had so richly deserved them.

Of course this feeling did not extend to Margaret, but then she had so much of her heart and time engrossed by another, that Edith could not and did not expect any

large amount of her society or attention just now.

At the appointed hour the young clergyman arrived to conduct the ladies to the rectory, and as the lovers walked together, Edith had now, for the first time, an opportunity of speaking privately to Nettia, whose kind and gentle countenance offered every encouragement to her less tranquil companion.

"Tell me at once, Annie," it was thus that Edith began, "how Mrs. Boisragon feels towards me now. Your letters led me to hope the bitterness was past, but tell me the simple truth without any regard to how it may affect me—Ah, Annie, I who have borne so much, may well bear, if needs be, a little more."

"Indeed Edith, I did tell you the simple truth. Mama is greatly changed since her illness ; she forgives you fully and freely, but I would not advise your meeting again at present. You see I speak quite frankly,

dear Edith, and I really believe it would be too great a trial for her to have the past so vividly brought back as it must be by seeing you. Forgive me for having said thus much, and let us avoid this subject in future."

"I understand you, Annie," replied Edith, with the very slightest shade of bitterness in her voice. "I am to be pardoned at a distance only, and those uttered words of forgiveness, for which I have so long thirsted, are never to be spoken—the mother's curse is never to be taken off my soul."

"Nay, Edith, mama did not curse you," said Nettie, soothingly—"we must not make things worse than they are."

"In her heart, Annie, she did; she must have done so, and I feel that peace will never visit me, that sorrows of all kinds will pursue me, until she says, in the old voice of tender kindness—'Edith I forgive you.' Perhaps this is not possible; it may

be that I ask too much, but, Annie, if ever repentance was sincere, mine is, and the sinner can do no more than repent, when it is too late for atonement."

"Dear Edith, a few years hence"—

"A few years hence, Annie, my heart may have ceased to beat with human hopes and fears. I cannot look forward as far as my own destiny is concerned. I have failed in one of the great objects, for which during the last few months I have alone cared to live."

Edith said this in a tone of such touching despondency, that Nettia's eyes filled with tears, and when, immediately after, Margaret and Mr. Howard turned to announce that they had arrived at their destination, the former observed with pain that both of them had been crying; and that Edith was still too much agitated to be able to speak calmly in the presence of a stranger.

"Come," Margaret said cheerfully, passing her sister's arm through her own, "this

will never do, young ladies. I require and claim your undivided attention at present; and I shall be woefully disappointed if you do not both fall into raptures over my house and garden. Charles, (looking round smilingly at her lover) you take Miss Egerton, and compel her admiration of everything, and I will try what I can do with this little sister of mine."

Mr. Howard had prepared a surprise for the ladies in the shape of a very tempting luncheon—of which Margaret was to do the honours. But Margaret was so anxious to show off her new and really delightful home, that she hurried as soon as possible from the table, totally regardless, just now, of the disappointment of the young rector, who had prided himself immensely on the taste and cleverness with which this little banquet had been arranged.

"I hope, my dear friend," he said, following her to the door, "that you will not always make a point of turning the atten-

tion of our guests from those things in which your husband particularly excels. I shall expect, by-and-bye, if I happen to be preaching an unusually good sermon, that you will insist upon the whole congregation going out to examine the epitaphs in the church-yard."

"No, no, Charles," Margaret replied with a smile, that he evidently thought most beautiful. "I will encourage everybody to admire your sermons, as much as I do myself; but I have no ambition to hear my husband eulogised as a purveyor of dainties—and besides, just now, I am thirsting for praise on my own account—so come, Nettie and Edith, and pronounce judgment on my modest dwelling place."

Mr. Howard pressed the small, white hand that was extended to him, and looked as if he thought himself (in spite of his unappreciated luncheon) the very luckiest mortal that the world contained.

Margaret bestowed on him a glance full of

tenderness, as they went out, and told him to wait for them in the garden.

"And now, tell me candidly, what you think of it all, dear girls?" said the future rectoress, when every room had been gone through, and inspected to her heart's desire.

"It is perfect," replied Nettia, "and just the home I should have chosen for you, dear Margaret, had a choice been given me."

"It is like yourself, my own dear Margey," said Edith, warmly, "calm, cheerful, unassuming, and without a fault."

"Ah! you are both flatterers, I see," added Margaret, kissing them, however, affectionately for their pretty speeches. "But now, we must go down to the garden—which, as Charles is inordinately proud of, I must entreat you not to praise too much."

Mr. Howard welcomed the ladies again with his sweetest smiles; he could not bear

Margaret to be away from him; and, independently of this, he was really impatient to receive the commendations due to his taste and industry, which had certainly both been exercised with peculiar success in the planting and laying out of the rectory garden. Edith felt a genuine interest in this, having an idea that she was a first-rate horticulturist herself; and the rector, charmed to find some one who could sympathize with him in his favourite pursuit, led her from shrub to shrub, and from tree to tree, with a pride and satisfaction that Margaret was both delighted and amused at witnessing.

"I declare," said Nettie, addressing her smiling companion, "you are quite a changed being since your engagement, Margaret. Formerly, it was a rare thing to see you positively merry—and now you are always in a sunny mood."

"I suppose I have caught the disease from Charles," was the prompt reply, "for nature has, assuredly, endowed him with

the merriest heart I have every yet encountered."

"I like to see it in persons of his profession. It teaches sceptics that religion is not the gloomy thing they fancy it."

"But Charles can be grave enough at proper seasons—it is only that he views all and everything on the very brightest side, that it is possible to be viewed. I never spend an hour with him without feeling more in love with life and human nature, than I was before. To him has really been given that charity which 'believeth all things.'"

"You are eloquent in his cause, dear Margaret," said Nettia, "and thrice happy are those whose judgments follow their hearts as confidently as yours may do."

There was something in the speaker's voice, even more than in the words themselves, that caused Margaret to turn and look anxiously in her companion's face ; but this was calm and serene as usual, and Nettia

answered the look with a smile that spoke volumes of resignation, and hopes long since, and for ever, abandoned.

Mr. Howard and Edith now came up to the other two, and soon after they returned home, all of them acknowledging that they had spent a most delightful morning.

CHAPTER X.

NETTIA'S CONFESSION.

MARGARET'S simple but ample *trousseau* not being quite completed, the three younger ladies, frequently joined by Miss Eliza, spent their mornings in the work-room, indulging, of course, in a vast amount of feminine gossip, though not perhaps of quite so trivial a kind as the lords of the creation presume to impute to all women indiscriminately. Once or twice Mr. Simeon had been persuaded to come in and read

aloud to them, but he declared that at every two lines he was interrupted with "Oh! one instant, Mr. Simeon, just while we measure this," or "I beg you ten thousand pardons, Mr. Simeon, but would you wait while this is tried on," and so he gave up the task in despair.

Every evening Mr. Howard spent at the cottage, and he was such a general favorite that his coming was always a signal for increased cheerfulness and enjoyment. Even Edith soon began to feel perfectly at home with him, and Margaret often said she should be jealous, because he was constantly bringing her sister some choice flower from his garden ; and this was a piece of gallantry that he rarely, if ever, bestowed upon herself.

There were still a few things that kept Edith restless and uncomfortable, and one of these was, that she often, on going suddenly into the room, found the whole of the party eagerly whispering together with the gravest and most important looks,

which became confused immediately on her entrance, while the conversation terminated abruptly. It was of course quite clear that something was going on, of which she was to be kept in ignorance; and her conscience, ever ready now to take the alarm, suggested that it concerned either Sir Stuart Bernarde or Mrs. Boisragon.

This suspicion was also increased by Nettia's very evident anxiety at the hour the postman usually arrived, and Edith summoned courage to ask her one morning from whom she was expecting a letter.

"From mama," was the rather abrupt reply, and the questioner turned away, disappointed, and feeling more uneasy than before.

At length—it might have been about four days after Edith had first suspected a mystery—Nettia found a letter laying beside her plate, when she came down to breakfast. Seizing it eagerly, and with a suddenly flushed cheek, she went out of the room again, and the remainder of the

party immediately began their morning meal, not however without many significant glances having been exchanged.

Edith observed all this, and her appetite was entirely destroyed; she sat quite silent, waiting anxiously for Nettia's re-appearance, and resolving, in her own mind, to discover the truth ere another day had past. Miss Eliza looked a little fidgetty too; and, at length, she said, in accents of the deepest consternation—

“Oh dear me! those beautiful cakes will certainly be as cold and hard as a stone. Don't you think,” addressing the party generally, “that I had better take Nettia's breakfast up to her room?”

Edith immediately sprang from her seat, saying—

“I will call Annie.”

And before anybody could interfere, she had almost flown up-stairs, and was knocking gently at her sister-in-law's door.

“Who is it?” said a low voice from

within—the voice of one who was evidently weeping.

Instead of answering, Edith opened the door, and, with a few brief words of apology, ran and threw her arms round Annie's neck.

“You shall not cry alone; you must not keep this secret from me any longer. Tell me all now—do—do, Annie.”

It was thus Edith spoke; and the other gently disengaging the arms that had been twined about her said firmly—

“This is merely a personal matter, Edith, and one in which sympathy can avail me nothing.”

“Will you swear that it does not relate to your mother or Stuart Bernarde?”

Nettia's white cheeks again became crimson, as she replied—

“I will not swear at all, Edith.”

“Then it does—I knew it did; and, Annie, I implore you to conceal nothing from me. My fears will suggest a thousand

horrible things, and I shall have no peace or rest till you tell me all."

Nettia began to look irresolute, and a brighter colour rose to her face, as she said—

"I had been led to think, Edith, that you did not now feel such a very, very deep interest in—"

"In Stuart Bernarde? Oh, Annie, you are doing me injustice now. The interest I feel is certainly a deep one; but it has no connection with the *heart*, or any sentiment I should blush to acknowledge. Were it otherwise, I would have died rather than question you as I have been doing now."

"Forgive me, Edith—I scarcely know what I meant myself. Indeed, I am most unhappy, and since this subject has been entered upon, I will comply with your request, and tell you all, though in doing so, I shall be acting against the judgment of your sister and my aunts."

"Dear Annie, go on—there is nothing that destroys me like suspense."

"This then is the whole matter," said Miss Egerton, vainly endeavouring to speak with a steady voice. "Stuart has ruined himself by gambling, and he refuses to take back the money he settled on Alick and myself. The moment the intelligence reached us, through my uncle Simeon, mama wrote to him, stating that we should never touch one penny of it, and that, in fact, we never *had* accepted it. In reply, he declared, laconically, that it was ours, and that nothing should induce him to rob us of our own. Just before I left home, I wrote to him myself, using, as you may believe, every argument that my heart and reason could suggest, to induce him to comply with our wishes. I implored him, if he would not have the whole, to take, at least, poor Alick's portion, which, though yours, by right, Edith, we knew well you would never accept. I told him, that no earthly power would ever tempt me, even if I were starving, to use any part of the

money, and that if he did not claim it, it would remain where it was till the end of time. In fact, I wrote so urgently, that I would not permit myself to doubt the success of my letter. The one I have this morning received from mama, encloses Stuart's reply ; and you may read it, if you will, Edith. The length, at any rate, will not weary you."

Edith, almost as much agitated as her companion, took the offered letter, and read the following :—

"MY DEAR COUSIN,

"You will cease urging me to do that which I have sworn I never will do, when I tell you that my compliance with your request would make me a hundredfold more wretched than I am. The necessity for active exertion is my only hope of escape from those horrible torments of mind and conscience that I have en-

dured since your brother's death was communicated to me. In a few weeks I shall leave Europe, probably for ever, and amidst new scenes and new people I may, in time, regain both the peace and the fortune I have so wilfully squandered. I will not ask you to think of me kindly, Annie, for your pure nature must revolt from a character so weak and vile as mine. I will ask you only to forget that your path was ever crossed by one who is not worthy, even to offer up a prayer to Heaven for blessings on your sinless head. Yet, if ever grace is given me to raise my burdened heart to the throne of the Eternal, for you, Annie, will its first request be uttered.

“STUART BERNARDE.”

In reading this letter, Edith could not forget that it was written by the man she had for a short time so wildly loved—the

only one who had ever called forth the passionate feelings of her nature—and when she gave it back to Nettia, tears were falling fast from her eyes.

“Annie, you must try to see him ; you will never let him go.”

She said this so energetically that Nettia looked up, and demanded eagerly what she meant.

“Why I mean, Annie,” the other continued in much excitement, “that if I were in your place I should forgive all the past. His evident wretchedness and poverty should plead for him, and restore him to his original position in my heart.”

Nettia gazed for a moment in unfeigned astonishment at the speaker, and then she said—

“And is it possible, Edith, that you can doubt my having forgiven him fully and freely, long, long ago. My affection,” (blushing deeply) “was formed of sterner stuff than that which one human error could destroy. I would give my life,

Edith, to see Stuart Bernarde restored to peace and happiness."

"Then my dear, dear Annie, what would be easier than to tell him all this, and to offer your own sweet self and the disputed fortune at the same time."

Edith had seized Nettia's hand in the eagerness of her subject, and was now kneeling beside her, looking up beseechingly into the pale, sad countenance, in which so little of human passion was discernible.

"Say you will do this, Annie, or let me do it for you—oh, it would make me so very, very happy. Ah, you will, you must, you shall."

Nettia, miserable as she was, could scarcely avoid smiling at the almost childish impetuosity of Edith's manner, but bending to kiss the upturned, pleading face, she said gravely and earnestly.

"You are speaking without reflection, dear Edith, or you would never counsel your sister to compromise her delicacy and self respect, by offering herself to one who

plainly and decidedly rejected her. I said I would give my life for Stuart, but I did not mean that I would become his unloved wife, or risk the chance of a second rejection."

"But Annie, if you were quite, quite, certain, that his love for you had returned."

"Do not let us suggest impossibilities, Edith, and, for your own sake, pray abandon all romantic visions concerning Stuart and myself. I am content with the destiny that has been appointed me, and I must leave him in the Hands of his Creator. Stuart has rejected me, and the money which is indeed his own. But he has no power, thank Heaven, to reject my prayers."

Edith would willingly have pursued this subject, and continued her arguments in favour of the step she suggested, but Nettia refused positively to prolong the discussion, and begged Edith to leave her alone for a short time.

When they met again at a later hour of the day, Nettia's countenance and manner had resumed their usual calm serenity ; and Edith sought in vain for any trace of the sufferings she felt certain this brave girl had been enduring.

CHAPTER XI.

**AN OLD SCENE REVISITED, AND AN OLD
FRIEND ENCOUNTERED.**

THE day before the wedding arrived, and Fernley Cottage assumed an air of bustle and importance, such as it had never yet had an opportunity of exhibiting, for though Margaret had entreated, and the spinsters had promised, that everything should be as quiet as it was possible to be, still, (as Miss Eliza justly observed) it was not in human nature to let a wedding take place

without some little fuss and preparation, out of the common way. So new curtains were put up, and summer carpets were laid down, and chairs and tables were rubbed till you might see your face in them, while the kitchen became a scene of anarchy and confusion, quite beyond the power of language to describe.

Poor Mr. Simeon, who was of course entirely helpless and in everybody's way, had a plate of cold meat given him on a side-table at about twelve o'clock; and then he was ordered out for the rest of the morning, with the promise of a substantial tea at six o'clock, if he did not make his appearance before that hour.

The rest of the party were all expected to assist, and under the superintendence of Miss Eliza they got on pretty well, with the exception of Margaret herself, who could not be made to understand how this ceaseless rushing to and fro, and turning the house upside down, could add to the importance or the solemnity of the morrow's

ceremony. So after a little while she escaped to her own room, and the good-natured Eliza agreed to absolve her from any further labour.

Nettia and Edith, however, were not so fortunate, and though they would both have preferred being with Margaret, their taskmistress found so much for them to do, and appeared so intensely to enjoy this opportunity of directing and ordering everybody, that they felt there was no hope of getting away till dinner-time.

As soon as this meal, which was taken in a scrambling fashion in the kitchen, (not because there existed any necessity for such a measure, but because Miss Eliza thought it looked more like some great change going on) as soon as it was concluded, Edith, who really had a dreadful head-ache, proposed to Margaret to take a short walk with her ; and the elder sister immediately complied.

They had not, however, gone many steps when Mr. Howard met them, and entreated

Margaret to return with him to the Rectory, where a person waited to speak with her concerning some village matter, in which she was interested.

"You will come too, dear, of course," she said to her sister, and Mr. Howard eagerly seconded this request; but Edith replied that she wished to get more of the country air, and that she would pursue her walk alone.

All this day she had suffered from more than usual depression of spirits, and the bright sunshine and soft air to which she had trusted for relief, appeared only to increase the internal gloom, by recalling past hours of happiness, and the image of one who had so thoroughly sympathized with her in worshipping nature, sunshine, and Spring.

There are some morbid states of mind in which people derive a positive satisfaction, not only from exaggerating their sufferings but from striving to increase them by the revival of associations connected with the

cause of these sufferings, and it was a state such as this that came upon Edith while she was walking through those green and familiar lanes alone, and incited her to the determination of extending her ramble as far as the heather dell.

She had some distance to go, but this was nothing to her young, swift feet, which had formerly been accustomed to very active exertion; so in about half-an-hour from the time her resolution was formed, Edith was standing on the rustic bridge, and looking down, as in days gone by, into the gently flowing water.

Yet not as in days gone by; for thoughts, hopes and feelings all had undergone a striking change, even since she had last stood on this same spot with throbbing heart and burning cheek, waiting for courage to pluck the forbidden fruit, and put the final seal to her destiny.

How vividly memory painted that summer evening's scene, with its strange mingling of triumph, vanity, shame and

bitter remorse! How distinctly she seemed to hear again those passionate and earnest tones, conveying to her the assurance that she was loved as she had desired to be; and how plainly she saw again the proud man's bending figure, his look of suffering sadness, transformed on her approach into one of rapture and delight. A sensation of oppression and suffocation came over Edith with these torturing reminiscences that she had so wilfully invoked; the soft west wind seemed hot and arid, and she felt a sudden and uncontrollable wish to reach the hill which had been so eventful in her history, to stand again on that spot where she had tempted fate, by exerting to their fullest extent, those fascinations with which she had been so fatally gifted.

Now she only yearned for a fresher breeze to cool her burning cheek, and for any aggravation of her sufferings, which would bring forth tears to relieve the heart that ached so sorely.

It was not till more than half the glen

was traversed, that Edith recollected having heard that Heather Lodge was to be sold, and that Sir Stuart's agent had arrived at Fernley, for the purpose of conducting the sale, and making other arrangements connected with the remnant of his employer's property.

This, now, was most unfortunate. He would probably be at the lodge, with, perhaps, all sorts of people besides. There was no other way of reaching the hill, and Edith, feeling it impossible to face the crew her imagination had conjured up, resolved to rest awhile on the smooth, dry turf, and then return home.

She began, too, in spite of her excitement, to feel very tired; and sitting down, she untied her bonnet, and supported her still aching head upon her clasped hands, looking at nothing now but the short grass, and the patches of half-blown heather that grew round the spot that she had chosen for her resting place.

Suddenly, (she might have sat there

about ten minutes, though the agitation of her thoughts prevented any chronicling of time) but quite suddenly she was startled by the sound of footsteps apparently approaching her. Annoyed at her own stupidity in having lingered so long, and very much inclined to feel indignation against the intruder, she looked up and saw—What was it that she saw?

A ghost?

Yes, a ghost, for surely never did mortal man walk the smiling earth with an aspect so ghastly and so unlife-like as that. Yet Edith neither screamed, nor attempted to fly. She only sprang to her feet, and exclaimed, in a voice of mingled astonishment, and horror,

“Sir Stuart Bernarde!”


And he, coming closer to her, and looking curiously into her still flushed and agitated face, seemed to be asking by what means she had escaped the retribution that had fallen upon him. It was thus, at least, that Edith interpreted that glance of enquiring

surprise that met her own, and she said, quickly, as if deprecating his contempt and abhorrence,

"I, too, have suffered, Stuart, and to the fullest extent that I was capable of enduring. But you—you are indeed changed."

"Edith," he replied, in a voice that accorded well with his appearance, and disdaining every form of ordinary greeting—"Edith, since you are not, as I at first imagined, a spirit from the other world, tell me all that has passed since we last parted—all concerning *them*."

There was an authority in his manner, which, independently of that too evident misery that went straight to her woman's heart, would have compelled Edith's acquiescence with this demand; and again resuming her seat, while he stood motionless at her side, she related everything that had occurred from the time of her visit to Devonshire, not forgetting to comment warmly on Nettia's admirable goodness and heroism, throughout the whole season of trial.



During the recital, she had studiously avoided looking at her companion; but when all was told, and still he made no observation, she raised her eyes, and saw that those of her auditor were filled with tears.

The proud man was weeping like a little child.

He did not turn away; he seemed quite unconscious that he was exhibiting a weakness, from which his sex, in general, so sensitively recoil, and Edith, compassionating his sufferings from her very soul, said, earnestly,

“ You have exaggerated your own part in this unhappy affair, Sir Stuart ; Heaven knows I am not the one to comfort you—I, who was so much more culpable than yourself, whose vanity, drowning the voice of conscience, led to all this irreparable mischief. But Annie, so free from human error—so clear in judgment—so kind and tender in heart—she would speak words of peace and consolation to—”

"To her brother's murderer?" interrupted Sir Stuart, in a harsh and bitter tone, "I know something of her heavenly charity, I believe she would utter only words of christian forbearance, of saint-like forgiveness—but I never intend that her pure eyes should rest upon so vile a sinner as myself again. She is good and holy. Let her go on her way rejoicing, and forget one who is for ever separated from her, both in this world and the next."

"But she cannot forget you," said Edith, eagerly, though feeling almost hopeless now of doing any good. "You are as near to her heart as you ever were; you would be nearer could she see how deeply you have suffered."

Sir Stuart only smiled a bitter and incredulous smile at the first part of this speech, but he replied with sudden and startling energy to the last word—

"Suffered! There is not an abject wretch on the face of the whole earth who can form the remotest idea of what my suf-

ferings have been. Cain, with his brother's blood crying to him from the ground, with the murderer's brand upon his brow, could have felt no pangs so sharp and deadly as mine. I have prayed aloud for death, for madness, for anything that could bring forgetfulness to my scorching brain. I gambled, not so much for the momentary excitement it produces, for that had no power over me, but because I wished to lose all, to become houseless and homeless, a wanderer on the face of the earth, with my daily bread to earn. You will wonder perhaps that with feelings such as these, I should not have taken my own wretched life; and I sometimes wonder at it myself. But though I can lay claim to no spark of piety, and fears of a future state have never haunted me, there has been always a shadowy remembrance of childish prayers lisped out at a mother's knee—a pure and righteous mother—holding me back from this last deadly crime. You look pale, Edith. I have no right to shock your gentler nature

by these wild confessions ; but it is a relief to give utterance to them—they have been locked up in my own heart for such a weary time, and there *is* something in a woman's calm and tranquil aspect that soothes the stern passions of men, and suggests milder and less hopeless thoughts—”

“ Oh !” interrupted Edith, looking into her companion's face entreatingly. “ If even I have a power like this, what might not Annie have? Do, do consent at least to see her, though only to say farewell for ever. I know your lightest wish would be sufficient to draw her to your side—For she loves you, Stuart, still.”

“ You plead eloquently,” said Sir Stuart, with a strange expression. “ Is your interest for Miss Egerton, or for myself?”

“ For both,” replied Edith, firmly and without a blush. “ I have no wish in the world more fervent than to witness a full and perfect reconciliation between you.”

The bitter and incredulous smile again

crossed his almost death-like features, as he said—

“ My faith is too weak to receive what your kind heart would have me credit— And, that you may concern yourself no further in this matter, I tell you frankly that I have no desire to believe what your words seem to import. The children of light can have no communion with the children of darkness. I would not, to save my soul, drag an angel into the gulf from which there is no escape for me.”

“ Stuart, your judgment is distorted ; you are limiting the mercy and the goodness of your Creator. I felt once as you feel now, as hopeless, as despairing, as unfit to mingle with the good and pure. But though perfect peace is yet I fear far from me, I have learnt from the word of God that the door of repentance is open to all, that the Saviour of mankind thought none too vile to pardon, and moreover that every event of this mortal life, is under the con-

trol of a Power that cannot err. The holiest and the best, the most sinful and the most weak, are only instruments in His hands to work out the purposes of a Divine Providence."

"All this may be as you say," replied Sir Stuart, gloomily; "but it does not alter the fact, that I, through lack of moral strength and principle, hastened, at least, the death of one who loved and esteemed me, who was far worthier of life than myself, and who never injured me by thought, word or deed."

Edith rose now, and held out her hand to her companion, striving to steady her voice as she spoke.

"Stuart, I see that I can do you no good, although you may do me harm. Let us part now, unless you will return with me to those who *have* the power of soothing you."

"Not for the whole world!" said Sir Stuart, hastily. "But, Edith, understand

before you leave me, that, what I have told you of my own feelings, ought, in no way, to apply to yours. *You* made all the atonement in your power. *You* received his entire forgiveness—your presence shed happiness over his last hours—and besides, you were but the tempted, and I was the cruel serpent in your path. Yet one more word, Edith, that you may not regret your charitable exertions on my behalf—you *have* done me good, and I bless you for it. Let this meeting remain a secret; I am only here for a few days; and I could not endure the sight of any old, familiar faces. When I am in a far distant country, you may tell Annie of your interview with her wretched cousin, and that her happiness is his strongest earthly wish. To you, Edith, I can only say, Heaven keep you in peace, and avert all future sorrow from that kind and gentle heart.”

He wrung her hand almost wildly as he spoke, and then, without waiting for a re-

ply, turned and walked slowly and feebly in the direction of Heather Lodge.

And Edith went home.

* * * *

"Oh! thank goodness, you are come at last," exclaimed Miss Eliza Cargill, as her favourite entered the parlour where the whole party, including Mr. Howard, were seated at tea. "Do you know you have actually been out three hours and a half, and we were getting quite in a fidget about you."

"Dear Edith," said Margaret, anxiously, "how pale and tired you look. Indeed, you are wrong to overwalk yourself. I was just going to send Charles to seek you."

"The air was so tempting," replied Edith, in a faint voice, "and a cup of tea will

quite revive me. I will take off my bonnet, and then join you."

She left the room as she spoke, but returned in a few minutes, and seated herself beside her sister.

"Come, you must try one of my cakes to-night," said Miss Eliza, coaxingly, seeing that Edith was eating nothing. "Why, you ought to have a ravenous appetite, after such a walk as yours; and who would ever think of fasting on a wedding eve?"

Edith made an effort to comply with the kind spinster's request; but every mouthful seemed to choke her, and she was obliged to give it up in despair.

"I think Mrs. Boisragon must have been with the fairies, she has brought home such a look of other worlds with her," said Mr. Howard, who appeared at present, to rejoice in a sufficient stock of happiness to distribute in lots to the whole human race, and yet leave an ample share for himself when all was done.

"She is over tired, poor thing!" said Miss Eliza, kindly, "go and lie on the sofa, my dear. We shall all be very quiet this evening."

And so they were, to Edith's great relief. For she had erroneously imagined (from the bustle going on in the morning) that the worthy spinsters intended to testify their rejoicing on this occasion by unusual merriment and hilarity, in which everybody would be expected to join.

It was, however, very different. There were certainly no sad or gloomy faces, but the cheerfulness of the whole party took a more subdued tone. They seemed all to feel now that one amongst them—one, well and justly beloved,—was about to commence a new existence, to take upon herself new duties, to enter upon that state, of which the great Apostle tells us, that those who cast their lot therein shall have "trouble in the flesh."

Margaret for her own part was singularly grave and quiet. She sat at the window

watching the changing forms of the bright clouds, as long as a gleam of light remained, and then she drew her chair to the sofa where Edith was lying, and held her sister's hand with an earnest but sorrowful tenderness.

She had no fears for her own future, no doubts of him to whom she had given all her warm, true heart, but it was impossible for one so affectionate and unselfish as Margaret to contemplate her own fair prospects, without weeping, in spirit, over the blighted destiny of that dear young sister, whose morning of life had opened with such brilliant promise.

Edith returned the fond pressure of Margaret's hand, and raised her tearless eyes to that kind and anxious face. At that moment the unuttered but fervent prayer of a loving, human heart, asking for a beloved one that peace which the world cannot give, ascended to the throne of the Eternal, bringing back a message of hope to her who, in pious faith, had breathed it.

Happy are those who in seasons of deep despondency, when earthly trials press heavily upon the soul, and all within is too dark for prayer to find an egress—happy are those who at such times, have loving, pious friends, to petition Heaven in their behalf, and ask for them those blessings they so urgently require.

Edith was ignorant of her sister's appeal to the throne of mercy, but she looked into that good and gentle countenance, familiar to her from infancy, and felt as though a pitying spirit were watching over her. By degrees, the restless throbbings of her heart subsided, the shadows of despair that had been fast creeping on, began to disperse, and the kindly, cheerful voices around her, fell no longer discordantly upon her ear.

It was the custom at Fernley cottage to have family worship morning and evening, and on this occasion Mr. Howard was to join in it, and read the portion of scripture preceding the prayers. It happened to be the psalm in which these words occur—

“Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.”

Edith's thoughts had been wandering, heretofore, but this sentence forcibly arrested her attention. She pondered upon the words; she repeated them again and again to herself, and when the whole of the little group knelt in prayer, she asked humbly and reverently that the desire of *her* heart might be granted—that those in whom she was so deeply, painfully interested, might find peace and happiness at last.

On rising from her knees she felt that the impossible had become possible, that what a few hours ago she had despaired of accomplishing, appeared divested now of half its difficulties. Who should limit His power, who hath promised to fulfil all the desires of those who trust in Him?

Before the party separated, Mr. Simeon made a little speech—not such a speech as is usually made at wedding breakfasts, or

public dinners, or any grand occasions of this sort ; but a speech that any benevolent old gentleman whose heart was full, would be likely to make on the eve of a dear friend's, or daughter's marriage. It was thus that, amidst the ready tears of his auditors, he concluded it.

“ It may seem presumptuous in one who has never himself entered into the holy state, to offer any remarks concerning it. But, in my younger days, when I mixed more generally in society, I had a habit of careful observation, and this was what I observed in connection with matrimony. That though it is a soil capable of producing most beautiful and pleasant flowers, these flowers must both be sown and diligently cultivated. They will not grow wild in the garden of wedlock, and those who shrink from the trouble of watching and tending them carefully, must expect nothing better than weeds. My dear friends, I make no doubt, that even without an old bachelor's hints, you would reap an abun-

dant harvest of flowers ; but age and experience have their privileges, and you will take in good part these simple observations —Heaven bless you both.”

Mr. Howard and Margaret shook hands heartily with the excellent Mr. Simeon, and assured him that they would never forget his friendly counsels. Then, as it was getting late, they all parted for the night, and Miss Eliza, looking out at the shining stars, predicted splendid weather for the morrow.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WEDDING DAY.

AND Miss Eliza was right. The sun rose brilliantly, the wind blew softly, and all the sweetnesses of nature seemed awake and rejoicing on Margaret's wedding day. Edith went to her sister's room at an early hour, carrying with her a little marriage gift that she had provided before leaving London.

"And oh, my Margey," she said, as she

embraced the fair bride elect with the warmest and truest affection, "you must imagine all the happiness I wish you, for there are no words that can express half of what I feel. I know you *will* be happy, for you are so good, so worthy of all the blessings which life has to bestow, and you have chosen one who has the wisdom and the good taste to appreciate your excellence ; but, dearest Margey, even now it seems like a dream to me ; I have been so long accustomed to consider you as belonging to myself alone, that it is difficult and painful to realize the idea of another possessing you entirely, of your little Edith being driven out of your heart, to make room for one who will claim it every bit."

"My little Edith knows me better than to believe what she is saying," replied Margaret, folding her sister fondly in her arms. "She is quite sure that I shall never cease to love her tenderly, or to feel a warm and deep interest in all that con-

cerns her. The only cloud on my happiness this day, my own Edith, is the thought that you have cares and troubles which I have no power of relieving. I cannot bear to see that dear face pale or sad."

"It will not be pale or sad to-day, Margey," said Edith, eagerly, "I feel in better spirits than I have done for some time. This glorious sunshine seems to promise such a bright destiny for you ; and though, in all my past life, I have lived only to and for myself, I hope henceforth to be able to find my happiness in that of others. Hark ! there are your wedding bells. How sweet they are Margey—how full of melody—Angel voices bidding you be of good cheer."

For Margaret's tears had begun to flow at the first sounds of that chiming music, and Edith would have dispersed them if she could, though they had their source in the most natural and womanly feelings—

"And resembled sorrow only,
As the mist resembles rain."

When Margaret's toilette was quite completed, (and for the benefit of those interested in such matters, I may tell them, that her dress was of a sober grey silk, and her bonnet of white chip,) the sisters went down together to the little parlour, where Miss Eliza was anxiously awaiting their appearance.

This worthy lady was seated at the breakfast table in very bridal-like attire, and looking the picture of contentment and importance. The contentment was on account of the happy prospects of the bride and bridegroom; the importance related to the part she had to play herself, as controller and director of the wedding feast. She rose from her seat as Margaret entered, and kissed her with tearful eyes.

Then putting into her hand a very elegant little trinket, she said, quite seriously, for, her—

“God bless you, my dear, and send to deck your marriage life the fairest and brightest of those flowers that Simeon was talking about yesterday evening.”

Soon after, Miss Cargill and Nettia came in, each with an appropriate offering, which was presented with fond words and kind wishes that brought grateful tears again and again to poor Margaret’s eyes.

Last of all came Mr. Simeon, for his toilette on this occasion had been an affair of time, and he brought as his wedding gift a splendidly bound book, on the duties and responsibilities of married people. The bride thanked him with a smile, and the well-meaning old bachelor was very happy in the idea that whatever judgment or wisdom his sweet, amiable friend, might hereafter lack, would be supplied to her from the pages of his valuable gift.

As the breakfast at which Miss Eliza

was presiding was only a preliminary one, it did not detain any of the party long, and two very plain carriages soon after conveyed them all to the village church, where Mr. Howard was waiting for them with an exquisite bouquet for the blushing Margaret, which he triumphantly assured her was composed entirely of flowers he had reared himself.

A friend of the bridegroom's performed the ceremony in the most solemn and impressive manner, and though there had been no little weeping while it was going on, every face wore a smile of gladness when, at the conclusion, the pale, gentle-looking bride turned from her husband's fond and joyful embrace, to receive the eager congratulations of those who had learned to love and value her so highly. Edith was unable to speak, but there was no need of this ; Margaret saw clearly into her heart, and was more than satisfied with the affection for herself therein contained.

They all went home amidst a loud and merry peal of the wedding bells, to enjoy together those dainties Miss Eliza had taken so much trouble, and so much more pleasure in providing. But it turned out that so very little was eaten by any of the party, that the worthy gentlewoman was afterwards heard to state that she should only prepare half the quantity on the occasion of the next wedding breakfast she was happy enough to superintend.

There were no remarkable speeches made, in honour of the bride and bridegroom, for Mr. Simeon had performed his first and last achievement in this way, on the preceding evening; and Mr. Howard's friend, though a most excellent clergyman, was a singularly quiet and timid person amongst strangers, owing partly to the fact of his being afflicted with an obstinate deafness. Miss Eliza was not aware of this, and, being seated next to him, she took advantage of the conversation becoming animated to make a slight remark that

she deemed peculiarly appropriate to the occasion, and which she had carefully reserved till now, as something to fall back upon, in case anxiety respecting the breakfast, should cause her usual conversational powers to fail. Looking up into her grave neighbour's face, and assuming that bashful tone, which I have often observed in elderly spinsters when they are addressing strangers of the opposite sex, she said, quite confidentially—

“ Well, matrimony is a pleasant change.”

“ I beg your pardon, madam,” said the gentleman, bending towards the speaker, and putting his hand to his ear in the manner of deaf people.

“ Oh, I merely remarked,” exclaimed Miss Eliza, in rather a louder key, “ that matrimony was a pleasant change.”

“ I did not quite catch your observation,” said Mr. Howard's friend again, approaching his ear still closer to the mouth of his now crimson-faced neighbour.

Poor Miss Eliza ! there was no help for

it. She must repeat once more in a stentorian voice, amidst the now profound silence and rather astonished looks of the whole party, that "matrimony was a pleasant change."

This time the gentleman either comprehended, or feigned from politeness to do so, for he bowed gravely in acquiescence, and returned to the dissection of a chicken's wing that he happened to have on his plate. But, Miss Eliza's composure was entirely at an end ; she could not get over the mortification and embarrassment this little incident had occasioned her, and Mr. Howard, compassionating her distress, warned Margaret that their travelling carriage was waiting at the door.

This was the signal for all the ladies to leave the table ; and the fair bride was surrounded and admired, and caressed, and wept over, till the moment of actual parting arrived, when the husband, with beaming looks, took his treasure from the arms of her friends and sister ; and assuring

them all that he was the happiest man in the world (an assurance that was certainly quite unnecessary), he lifted her into the carriage—which, amidst waving and kissing of hands, from those who were left behind, soon bore this really happy pair far beyond the quiet village of Fernley.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS ELIZA'S SUCCESSFUL INVITATION.

EDITH would have felt her sister's loss acutely, but for two circumstances—one was, that she had agreed to remain at Fernley until the bride's return (which, owing to Mr. Howard's numerous duties, could not be delayed longer than ten days), and the other was, that her thoughts were very much engrossed with a consideration of the ways and means of bring Nettia and Sir Stuart Bernarde together.

During many waking hours of the night that followed Margaret's wedding, Edith's mind had suggested and rejected at least half a hundred plans for the accomplishment of this laudable purpose, and she was as far as ever from coming to a decision when, the next morning at breakfast, a simple remark of Miss Eliza's determined her to enlist that very benevolent lady as an emissary in her service. The remark was only,

"Well now, what a great pleasure it will be to have this wedding of our dear Margaret's always to look back upon—to think that we have helped, in ever so slight a degree, to bring about the happiness of one we love so dearly."

"Now, Miss Eliza," said Edith, when the morning meal was concluded, "you must let me help you put the rooms in order, and assist in all the thousand little matters that I am quite sure you are dying to begin, because I want you to take a long walk with me this afternoon."

“A long walk, my dear!” exclaimed Miss Eliza, pausing in the act of tying a cover on an embroidered chair; “what can you want to take a long walk with me for? Nettia will be a much pleasanter companion, and I have really enough work to keep me at home for a month.”

“But I will assist you with all this tremendous work, and I am sure you will not refuse me the first favour I have asked of you. How do you know, now, that I am not going to conduct you into the presence of those fairies that Mr. Howard accused me of having visited the other evening—but hush! here comes Annie, and you must not betray my secret.”

Whether Miss Eliza believed there was a secret or not, she was prudent enough to hold her tongue, and when about four o'clock, Edith, ready dressed, tapped at the spinster's door, it was opened immediately, and disclosed a smiling face and a neat little figure, attired in a walking costume.

"I knew you would come," said Edith, looking gratefully at her good natured friend, who replied promptly.

"You must keep your promise about the fairies though, or I shall be woefully disappointed, I can tell you."

Believing herself bound to conceal the fact of her previous meeting with Sir Stuart Bernarde, Edith found some difficulty in introducing the subject, without exciting the suspicion of her companion. Her object was to discover how far the Cargills, (for she knew one was the echo of the other,) would be disposed to assist in bringing about the reconciliation she so ardently desired.

"Is Heather Lodge sold yet?" was her first question, as Miss Eliza trotted obediently at her side towards the rustic bridge.

"Good gracious ! how you startled me," was the reply. "I was just wondering whether cook would remember to warm up those cakes for tea. We shall be quite

hungry by the time we get back, my dear."

"Yes!" said Edith, "but is Heather Lodge sold?"

"I don't quite know, I should think not—but why do you ask?"

"I must echo your words—I don't quite know; but why should we not go and ascertain."

"La, my dear, you have no notion what a distance it is—You would be tired to death."

"No fear of that—the road is quite familiar to me—will you go?"

"Oh I don't mind, if you have a fancy for it—but I expect it will give us both a heart ache, if it does nothing else."

"Should you like to see Stuart Bernarde, again?"

"Ay, that I should, better than he would believe, I dare say—It was only the evening before your dear sister's wedding, that I was longing to have him seated amongst us, and thinking if he is sad and sorrowful

—as I'll answer for it poor fellow ! he is—
how much good, Charles Howard, with
his cheerful, hopeful mind, might do him.”

“ I have no doubt of it, but do you know
I cannot help fancying that Annie would
do him more real good than anybody else,
if they could once be brought together.
Why do not you ask him to visit you while
she is there.”

Because we are quite sure he would not
come, or if he would that Nettia, feeling as
she does now, would not stay—Poor dear !
I should be sorry to expose her to such a
trial, without being certain of the result.”

“ Then if Sir Stuart were suddenly to start
up from the ground, or be brought before
you by the fairies I promised to shew you,
do you mean to tell me that you would
not even ask him to go home with us to
tea.”

Miss Eliza probably thought her little
companion (who was hurrying her along
at a speed to which her less agile feet were
quite unaccustomed), had lost her senses ;

but she replied as well as this breathless pace would permit.

“No my dear, I could n’t possibly mean to make myself out such a brute as that— But as we are not going to bid for Heather Lodge, I must entreat you to walk a little slower.”

“Edith restrained her impatient steps, and said nothing more, till they were quite close to the lodge. Then, turning abruptly to her greatly mystified companion, she exclaimed with a smile—

“Now have you really sufficient courage to be introduced to my fairies of the wedding eve?”

Miss Eliza pulled out her watch and declared that it was dreadfully late ; she thought they had much better return home at once—but Edith’s quick eyes had detected a shadow passing and re-passing the gothic window of the Lodge, and she had no intention of abandoning her design, now that it appeared so near its accomplishment.

“ Well we will go,” she said, “ since you are tired, but as I may never visit this spot again, I should so much like one of those pale flowers that are creeping round that pretty window—Dear Miss Eliza, I am ashamed to ask you to commit a theft for me, but I am so terribly short, that I should not be able to reach half the height myself—Ah, you are so good.”

For poor Miss Eliza, seriously believing now that her young friend’s mind was wandering, had walked towards the house for the purpose of gratifying her strange fancy.

Instead of following her obliging, and (if the truth must be told) rather alarmed companion, Edith crept round to the side of the lodge, and watched the result of her experiment.

She saw Miss Eliza walk leisurely up to the window, take a rapid survey of the land immediately surrounding her, and then elevate her arm, while she stood on tiptoe, to pull down one of the coveted

creepers. But the worthy spinster laid no fairy's grasp upon the delicate flowers. Probably she was willing to vent upon an unconscious object the slight impatience Edith's caprice and the fatigue of her long walk had excited. At any rate, she contrived to sever from the wall quite enough of the plant to weave a garland for every day in the year, and the rustling noise that this occasioned was succeeded, as Edith had anticipated, by the rapid throwing up of the near window, and the presentation of Sir Stuart's pale and now fiercely questioning face.

Unhappy Miss Eliza! She forgot, for a moment, that ghosts seldom look fierce, and always do things quietly. She opened wide her eyes, gave a loud scream, and before her equally astonished relative could rush to assist and reassure her, she had fallen to the ground, and was much nearer fainting than she had been in her whole life before.

Of course nothing remained for the baro-

net but to carry his mysterious visitor into the lodge, and convince her, both by his solemn assurances, and the application of cold water to her temples, that he was no ghost, but the real, living Stuart Bernarde of old times; and this at length satisfactorily explained, Miss Eliza's apprehensions were converted into the liveliest expressions of pleasure and delight at the meeting, amidst which her little friend outside was, for the moment, quite forgotten.

Her little friend, who stood there so quietly, laughing and crying by turns to herself, and feeling perfectly certain now, that everything would come to pass exactly as she desired it to do.

And how fared it, in the meantime, with the proud, gloomy baronet, who had so studiously shunned every possibility of being seen by his pitying relatives at Fernley. How did he look and feel when kind Miss Eliza, in her cheerful, every-day voice, asked him (in a manner that assumed his compliance as a certainty) to return to

return and take his tea with them at the cottage?

You will remember with what horror he shrank from the same proposition when it was made to him before by Edith—how sensitively he recoiled from the thought of having his wounds probed and examined by these sympathizing and tender-hearted people. No ; there was madness in the bare idea. He would rather, far rather, bleed to death, than expose his sufferings to the common gaze.

But Miss Eliza—matter-of-fact, and un-heroic little body that she was—put the affair upon such a different footing. It never once occurred to her to say,

“Come, and let us soothe and comfort you—come, and receive pity and good advice.”

But it did occur to her to say—and to say, too, in a very hearty and affectionate tone,

“Come home and take a quiet cup of tea with us.”

And what could Sir Stuart reply to a simple, everyday sort of invitation like this?

It was quite impossible—and he felt it to be so—to expatiate on his sufferings to Miss Cargill. There was not the slightest opening for him even to allude to them; and the sensitive baronet, who shrank at all times from every demonstration of strong emotion, would have died rather than commit the absurdity of mingling the passionate sufferings of his proud heart with a smiling spinster's invitation to tea!

Equally impossible would it have been for him to plead a prior engagement, inasmuch, as he was not on visiting terms with anybody except the Cargills, within fifty miles of Fernley. So after a brief hesitation, and an assurance that it must be a farewell visit, he consented to return with the delighted Miss Eliza, who now recollected that Edith was outside, and commu-

nicated this fact, with some embarrassment, to Sir Stuart.

He made no comment on it however, and the blood that had rushed to his pale cheek, quickly retreated, leaving it a little whiter than before.

Probably, the kind hearted spinster, who had acted on the impulse of her feelings in giving him this invitation, began to reflect now on the trials to which his acceptance of it would expose him, for she said hurriedly,

“We shall *all* be so very glad to have you amongst us again. You will find a very quiet, but I assure you, a very friendly family party.”

Sir Stuart bowed rather absently, but asked no questions ; and Miss Eliza, tripping on before him, looked round anxiously for Edith.

Not finding her, she concluded, at last, that her little friend had made her escape at the first sound of the baronet's voice ; and forgetting, in all the recent

excitement, what Edith had said to her about inviting Sir Stuart, the well meaning, but not very clear headed spinster, became filled with misgivings concerning the prudence of what she had just done.

It was too late, however, to retreat, without stumbling upon painful subjects ; so she wisely kept her uneasiness to herself, and entertained her silent companion during their walk through the glen, with an account of Margaret's courtship and marriage, from its commencement to the very moment when they drove off on their wedding tour.

In the meantime, Edith, having heard, through the open window, Sir Stuart's acceptance of Miss Eliza's invitation, had hastened home, with her heart full of gladness, to prepare Nettia for the meeting. There was no time now for explanation, even had she been disposed to give it. They must be following close upon her footsteps—and she could only

say (having drawn Miss Egerton into a room apart)

“ Annie, dear Annie, he is coming. Don’t look bewildered—don’t disbelieve me.—You will hear all about it, from Miss Eliza ; but I knew you would like to be warned of it first. Annie—do you hear—do you comprehend ? Stuart Bernarde is coming home with your aunt. He will be here immediately.”

But poor Nettia, though she undoubtedly heard every word and knew that something strange and startling was being communicated to her, gave no signs of understanding what it was. She put her hand, which shook perceptibly, to her forehead, and looked enquiringly at her companion, whose nature being so totally different, could but dimly comprehend the source of emotion like this—the depth and intensity of an affection which had outlived all that had given it birth.

Woman’s tact came, however, to her aid, and she said quickly,

"I must leave you now, Annie, to tell my wondrous tale to Miss Cargill. Go to your own room, and I will call you when tea is ready."

Without waiting for a reply, Edith turned away, and meeting Mr. Simeon, she deputed him to convey the news to his sister, while she retired to rest her weary feet, and compose, as well as she might, the agitation of her spirits. For though she had striven hard, and in a great measure succeeded, in banishing self from all her recent thoughts, it was impossible that the past could be entirely forgotten, or that she could look forward with perfect calmness, to the idea of spending a long evening in the society of Stuart Bernarde.

It was not many minutes ere an unusual bustle down stairs announced that Miss Eliza and her unwilling guest had arrived ; and almost immediately after, the former tapped at Edith's door, and begged admittance for one instant only. To her hurried

and anxious apologies for what she had done the other replied, cheerfully—

“ My dear friend, you could have done nothing that would have pleased me better. You have surely forgotten my suggestion to you as we walked along—I have prepared Annie, for I heard the invitation, so you had better not go to her just yet. We will come down together.”

Delighted to find that after all she had not committed an indiscretion, Miss Eliza now gave full vent to her satisfaction, and telling Edith she was a “ dear thing,” hurried away to order the best tea-service, and see about her favourite cakes.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BARONET AT TEA.

NETTIA opened her door the moment Edith knocked, but the latter was alarmed at her excessive paleness, and the continued trembling of her hands, which she sought in vain to hide.

“Are you ready now, Annie?”

This was all that Edith said, and the other replied only—

“Yes! as much as I should ever be.”

Then they went down silently together.

It is just and right that those who sin should suffer—that retribution should ever follow deeds which reason and conscience have not sanctioned, and it is well at all times that the pride of man should be brought low. But the process by which this is effected, sometimes appears too hard and trying for human strength to endure. And to Sir Stuart Bernarde, with his sensitive, chivalrous, and tender heart, the sudden appearance of those two fair young creatures, (bearing the traces of premature sorrow, and clothed in their deep mourning dresses,) was an ordeal, whose bitterness he had scarcely calculated upon.

When they went in, he was seated with his back to the door, talking of indifferent matters with Miss Cargill, but an exclamation from that lady warned him that somebody had entered the room, and he started up and stood motionless as they advanced towards him.

For Nettie the trial of this public meet-

ing was scarcely less severe than for Sir Stuart. To see one, to whom the heart clings tenderly, weighed down by care and suffering, is ever a cruel pang, and little needs the aggravations which accompanied the present case, and forced themselves upon Nettia's memory, as, with a suddenly crimsoned cheek, she held out her cold and trembling hand to the pale and speechless baronet, who pressed it for a moment between both his own, and then abruptly let it fall.

To Edith his greeting was less embarrassed, not only because they had met before, but because she evinced greater self-possession than Miss Egerton. And now, the worst being over, the whole party resumed by degrees their usual manner, and Sir Stuart enjoyed the privilege of remaining silent and undisturbed amongst them.

Miss Eliza's volubility was fortunately proof against all accidental circumstances—against events however startling and unexpected, which would chain the tongue

of ordinary talkers for a month. And so she rattled away, during the whole of tea time, with a perseverance, and a total disregard to the little attention that was bestowed on her, that merited the highest praise.

In spite of all, however, there was no possibility of denying that the evening was a heavy and an uncomfortable one, very unlike the usual evenings at Fernley cottage, where the kindly spirits of sociability and good-humour held their undisputed reign. Sir Stuart felt that he was "the spectre at the feast," and this he certainly was, but he fancied that he was also the unwelcome guest, and this he certainly was not.

He should have read the clear pages of one pure and loving heart, which was beating as warmly for him as in those far off sunny days, when with fond words and fair promises he won it for once and for ever.

Sceptic as he was, he might have learnt something of this had he watched that changing cheek when his approaching exile was named—when he told them that another fortnight would see him on his way to lands where strange faces and strange voices alone would greet the wanderer.

Men talk largely of the strength and impetuosity of their affection, and true it is, that what they call such, often breaks down every barrier that is opposed to its gratification—but only to woman's nature has been granted that love which beareth all things and endureth all things, which like the stars of Heaven, is content to hide itself during countless days and nights, and bide patiently its hour to shine.

It was yet early when the baronet rose to take leave of the party, but no one had the courage to ask him to prolong his stay. He had told Miss Eliza that this must be a farewell visit, and there was something in

his look and manner that held back his relatives, much as they really desired it, from pressing him to revoke the sentence.

Only Nettia, at the last moment, as she again gave him her hand, said in a voice that was scarcely audible from emotion, and which he alone heard.

“You will come to us once more, Stuart—I wish to —”

The words died on her pale lips, and tears rushed impetuously into her eyes. He looked at her with a strange, half curious expression, and then, without replying to her request, seeming to have forgotten that it had been addressed to him, he turned suddenly away, and making hurried adieux to all the rest, left the house like a person in a dream.

“Oh dear,” said Miss Eliza, when the sound of his footsteps on the gravel path of the garden had quite died away—“I wish some of us had asked him to come again. It must look so unkind you see; but I declare I did n’t know what to do.”

Nor I," said the sister, "because he did not appear at his ease amongst us—but I should be sorry indeed that he thought he was not wanted."

"Of course we should all be sorry, eh, Nettia?" exclaimed Miss Eliza, turning round to where her niece had been sitting.

But the place was vacant, and its former occupant appeared no more that night.

"I tell you what," said the last speaker, after the pause of a few minutes. "Simeon shall go down to the lodge in a day or two, and carry an invitation to dinner. Perhaps it would be pleasanter for Stuart to come to dinner than to tea. Oh dear, I think this would be an excellent plan—what do you say, Simeon?"

"Let the ladies decide," answered the gallant old bachelor—"I am agreeable to anything."

The matter was accordingly put to the vote the next morning, and it ended in a resolution to adopt Miss Eliza's suggestion,

and send Mr. Simeon with a letter of invitation to Heather Lodge.

It would have been a long, and rather tedious walk, for a person who was contented with the one street that Fernley boasted, and preferred its homely and familiar aspect, to all the romantic glens in the world. So it was fortunate for Mr. Simeon that this excursion was spared him, by the sudden appearance at the cottage, of Sir Stuart himself, on the very morning that the old gentleman was to have carried the invitation.

Edith and Nettia were just on the point of starting for the rectory, to give some orders to the servants concerning the return of their new mistress, and Sir Stuart could do no less than offer to become their escort. Edith immediately contrived to add Mr. Simeon to the party, and to secure his arm for herself, so that the cousins were obliged to walk together whether they liked it or not.

On their return Sir Stuart was warmly

entreated to spend the remainder of the day at the cottage, but this he firmly declined doing, pleading business which could not be delayed. The invitation to dinner he also refused, but promised to call again some evening before he left the neighbourhood.

Nettia was anything but communicative respecting her long *tête-à-tête* with her cousin, but Edith thought she detected in her face a faint light, such as is seen occasionally breaking through a sky, on which dark clouds have long hung heavily.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BRIDE'S WELCOME HOME.

THE whole party from the cottage were assembled at the Rectory a few evenings after this, to receive and welcome the bride to her new home. It had been arranged before she left, that these dear friends should spend the first evening with her, and Edith was to be her guest altogether during the remainder of her stay at Fernley.

Miss Cargill and Mr. Simeon were seated

in easy chairs on either side of the sunny window that looked into the young rector's charming garden ; Miss Eliza was as busy and important as usual, re-arranging everything that was perfectly arranged before ; and the two younger ladies were walking together up and down the wide gravel path, from whence they would be able to catch the first view of the carriage containing Margaret and her husband.

"How late they are," said Edith suddenly, looking at her watch. "We have been here nearly two hours."

"But then," replied Nettia, "we came much too early ; my good aunts always will insist upon being far before their time on every possible occasion."

There was quite an unusual bitterness in Nettia's voice as she said this, which would have been incomprehensible but for Edith's answer—

"It will indeed be provoking if Sir Stuart should have gone to the cottage after we left, and refused to join us here."

"Which he certainly would do," said the other quickly—"And I am sure he will not be able to come again."

Edith thought differently, but she only said—

"Oh! I hope Margaret will arrive before the sun goes down. The house and garden look so bright and cheerful now, just as they should look to welcome such a sweet little wife as my Margey. Annie, let us put our bonnets on, and walk a short way up the road; we shall see the carriage sooner."

Nettia had no objection to offer to this proposal, and it is not unlikely that the secret hope which had urged Edith to make it, suggested itself also to her companion. At all events, they were both speedily equipped, and walking briskly along the quiet country road.

Particularly quiet it was on this occasion, for they met only a flock of sheep, a couple of old women, and a cart, containing stones from a neighbouring quarry, which came

on at a slow, hearse-like pace, and gave the two ladies ample time to enjoy the well remembered air of "Love Not," which the driver was whistling very skilfully to beguile the tedium of his solitary way.

"This is not lively," said Edith, growing quite pale. "Let us walk on faster, Annie."

"Let us rather go back," was the reply, in a weary voice; "we shall gain nothing by remaining here."

So they turned round and began retracing their steps towards the rectory, at a few yards from which a gentleman overtook them, and by the suddenness of his salutation, caused Miss Egerton's cheek to rival the hue of the crimson clouds that were gathering fast in the west.

"You have been to the cottage?" said Edith, thinking her friend would like to regain her natural colour before she spoke.

"I was there ten minutes ago."

"And you were coming to join us at my

sister's. I am sure Margaret will be delighted to see you."

"You are very good ; but I could not think of intruding on Mrs. Howard this evening—I am on my way to the lodge—or was, rather, till I caught a glimpse of you and your companion."

"But surely, Sir Stuart," said Edith, "you do not contemplate cheating us of your promised visit in this way. Annie, pray tell your cousin that he is acting most unkindly."

Sir Stuart turned now to look into the face of the hitherto silent Nettia, who was just on the point of answering Edith's appeal, when the latter exclaimed, joyfully—

"Oh, there comes dear Margey's carriage, and I must walk on to meet it. Don't you come, Annie, because you are so dreadfully tired. Sir Stuart will take you to the rectory."

Without waiting for a reply, Edith flew off, and in a few minutes was clasped in

her sister's arms, and, after that, embraced affectionately by her new brother, who insisted on resigning his seat in the carriage to her, that she might, as he said, hear without any delay, how bitterly his poor wife repented her marriage.

"Repentance must agree with her then wonderfully," replied Edith, looking with delight at Margaret's calm and happy face. "And I should imagine that you, too, Mr. Howard, had been indulging in the same sentiment."

"Undoubtedly," he replied, with a beaming smile; "and I am going at once to confide my troubles to Miss Egerton, whom I see coming with sympathising aspect towards me. But who may that stately individual be, just parting from our lovely friend?"

"That," said Edith, with some embarrassment, "is her cousin, Sir Stuart Bernarde."

Mr. Howard asked no more questions, but walked on quickly to meet Nettia, with

whom "dreadful fatigue" seemed to agree as well as repentance with Margaret.

The sun had not quite set, when they all arrived at the rectory door. The golden clouds still cast bright gleams upon the windows, lighting up the dark ivy that clung round their frames, and tinging every object which their rays could reach with a soft and mellow radiance—not forgetting to linger in the pleasant corner where Miss Eliza had established her tea-table, and where that cheerful lady sat, surrounded by her cups and saucers, looking as though she only wanted to see them filled to complete her measure of human felicity.

Margaret's arrival nearly occasioned the destruction of the whole service, for although Miss Eliza had been expecting her for the last two hours, her astonishment, when she actually walked into the room, of course, exceeded all bounds, and drew from the amiable spinster a variety of exclamations, in which, "Nonsense!" "Is it

possible!" "Well, I never *did*!" were chiefly conspicuous.

Mr. Howard relieved his gentle wife from the embraces and the congratulations that were threatening to overwhelm her, by coming forward and welcoming the friends who were assembled beneath his roof, in a very cheerful and cordial manner. Nor could he let the opportunity pass without introducing a few words respecting his own exceeding happiness, and the beloved wife to whom he owed it all. This, of course, sent Margaret to her room in tears, and caused all the other ladies to think Mr. Howard little short of an angel.

The remainder of the evening passed delightfully, and every one was sorry when the hour for parting came. Only, as Miss Eliza justly observed, "it was such a comfort to remember that they could meet again as soon and as often as they pleased."

Edith ran up-stairs with Nettia to assist

in putting on her cloak, and, it may be, to ascertain if her sister-in-law were disposed to be more communicative respecting this second *tête-à-tête* with the baronet, than she had been with the first.

“Well, Annie, I suppose I shall not see much more of you—I have only one week now. Shall you come to the rectory to-morrow?”

“Oh yes, if Margaret will have me—I will be here soon after breakfast.”

“Why not in the evening, and then you could stay to tea.”

Nettia pulled her veil quickly over her face, as she replied—

“I think we had better settle it for the morning, because it is just possible—I do not very much expect it, but it is just possible—that Stuart may come to the cottage in the evening.”

And this was all that Edith could learn.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SPINSTER'S LAST TEA-PARTY.

ONLY one brief communication from Hampstead had reached Edith since she had been away, and this was from old Hannah, and conveyed the intelligence that Mrs. Lascelles was not much better, but that she entreated her daughter on no account to hurry her return.

Edith, though she was delighted to be with her sister, would have been better pleased to have received a single line from

her mother, expressive of a desire to have her home again; but as this was denied, she endeavoured to make herself contented where she was, and to banish, for the present, all selfish interests and regrets.

Nowhere could she have found this so easy as at Fernley Rectory, for the daily contemplation of Margaret's happiness and her husband's devotion, was enough to fill any heart with pleasant thoughts, and to inspire the most cheerful views of life—life divested of all romantic dreams, but more beautiful in its simple reality, its purity, and in the earnestness of its one great aim, than any dreams could represent it.

Mrs. Howard had entered upon the duties of her new station at once; not carelessly or with just sufficient spirit to escape the condemnation of her neighbours, but zealously and with her whole heart and soul, as one who would have to give an account to her Maker, of the talents entrusted to her care. The young rector had no longer to complain of being overworked,

for his wife took all she could take out of his hands ; and the only disputes Edith ever heard at the rectory were occasioned by the husband's tender anxiety concerning the exertions his delicate Margaret persisted in making, and which she declared did her more good than all the repose in the world.

But the evenings they always had to themselves, and these were seasons of particular enjoyment to Edith, as well as to the married pair. Generally Mr. Howard worked in his garden till the sun had set, while the two ladies strolled about, chatting to each other or to him, and admiring or abusing the results of his labour, as they were disposed to flatter or to tease, though Edith usually performed the first part, and Margaret made it a point of duty to counterbalance her extravagant praises with the last.

Sometimes, when they happened to have an interesting book, the rector would read aloud to them while they worked or sat in

luxurious indolence, enjoying the pleasant sunshine of those bright May evenings that were so gladdening and refreshing to the hearts that worshipped nature—so peculiarly delightful to those who had only calm and sunny days to anticipate.

Little by little, Edith was becoming initiated in the great secret of existence, and over all her mind a sensation of repose was stealing, which made her almost shrink from the thoughts of returning to scenes where hopes and fears would again agitate and unsettle her heart—a heart that yearned too passionately for affection, to be satisfied with cold words and looks from one in whom its warmest feelings were interested.

But this delightful week seemed to fly on wings of fabulous swiftness, and the last day of her visit arrived, just as her brother and sister were beginning to look upon her as one of the household, and to feel that her vacant chair would be an unpleasant object, and her absence create a

blank, to which they should be some time in growing reconciled.

Their warm expressions of regret at the shortness of her visit were very gratifying to Edith ; but she felt now that she ought to return to her mother, whose illness gave her a claim on her daughter's heart, which no coldness could quite put aside. Besides, she was not always cold, and in Edith's memory there were treasured a few precious recollections that she resolutely brought forward now, and placed in the strongest light, to give a pleasurable interest to the future.


Mr. and Mrs. Howard were to accompany their sister to spend the last evening at the cottage.

Edith had only seen Nettia twice since the night of Margaret's arrival, and on neither of these occasions had she voluntarily mentioned Sir Stuart. When questioned on the subject, she replied with evident reluctance, and Edith, having ascertained that they had met more than once,

forbore to press her enquiries. But she hoped that Nettia would not continue so reserved now they were going to part, because, in this case, she should continually be haunted by the fear that it was not all clear between them yet—that her exertions in their favour had been in vain.

Margaret, who was, of course, in her sister's confidence, and scarcely less anxious than Edith, for a happy termination to the affair, augured badly from Nettia's silence and reserve, but they both anticipated discovering something on this last evening, and set out for the cottage, with their thoughts full of Miss Egerton and Sir Stuart Bernarde.

It would be superfluous to relate how the warm-hearted spinsters and their brother received these valued friends, or how many lamentations were uttered on the subject of Edith's approaching departure. The few weeks she had spent amongst them, had been such a pleasant, happy time, that they could not endure the



idea of having it broken up by the loss of one of the party. Besides, it might be years before she would come to them again, and what changes, in this little circle, might, ere then, have taken place.

Nettia sighed, unconsciously, as Miss Eliza, (the voice of the whole family,) was giving expression to these regrets and forebodings ; but the next moment her cheek rivalled the colour of the brightest rose, as a shadow suddenly darkened the parlour window, and was succeeded by the abrupt entrance of Sir Stuart Bernarde.

Having greeted the whole party, and been introduced to Margaret's husband, he took a chair between Edith and Nettia, and entered into conversation with the former, who rejoiced sincerely to observe the favourable change that had come over his aspect and manner since the evening she first met him in the glen. He was still very grave, and, one would have imagined, in watching his countenance while he spoke, that the way to smile was

unknown to him ; but, with all this gravity, there was something so like repose, that it was impossible not to believe that repose itself would soon find a way to the heart that had so long been yearning for it.

“ I have brought you a few flowers,” he said, turning from Edith to address Miss Eliza ; “ and among them there is a shoot from that creeping plant, which you seemed to admire the other evening. I am not much of a gardener myself ; but if you are not afraid to trust me, I will put them in the ground for you after tea.”

“ This must be a parting gift,” thought Edith ; and she glanced at Nettia to see if she understood it in the same way.

But Miss Egerton’s face, except in moments of surprise, betrayed little of what was passing in her heart ; and now she was gazing, with a curious intentness, into the empty cup that stood before her.

“ Oh, we have a famous gardener here,” replied Miss Eliza, indicating Mr. Howard by a smiling nod at that gentleman ; “ and,

I propose, as it is such a charming evening, that we all adjourn to the garden when tea is over, and choose together the spots for putting in your flowers. It is so kind of you to have thought of me."

Miss Eliza's proposition meeting with unanimous approbation, the usually lingering meal was soon dispatched, and they all went out, and speedily became, one way or another, very busy indeed.

Mr. Howard, who was quite in his element, initiated the attentive baronet in various mysteries connected with horticulture in general, and promised still further enlightenment, when Sir Stuart would condescend to honour the rectory with a visit. Margaret, as in duty bound, lingered near her husband, and felt a pleasing conviction that he was doing the gloomy Scotsman an immensity of good.

It might have been so ; but people are, sometimes, ungrateful enough to grow tired even of having good done to them ; and, after awhile, Sir Stuart left the husband and

wife to make love together, and went to seek the other ladies, who, less devoted to gardening, had strolled down the quiet lane—over which a clear bright moon was now shining splendidly.

He soon came up to three of them—Miss Eliza and her two pets—and as the lane, at that part, was very narrow, the former considerably walked on with Edith, leaving the two cousins to follow as they could. About a quarter of an hour after, the voice of Mr. Simeon was heard summoning his sister to the house, and turning, with her companion, to obey it, she saw, to her surprise, that Sir Stuart was walking at a short distance from them—alone.

“Why, where is Nettia?” they both asked in the same breath, and he replied that she had just left him, feeling the night air growing chilly.

“It is cold,” said Miss Eliza, shivering, “so I will run on, my dear, and see what

I am wanted for—Stuart will take charge of you.”

Edith acquiesced silently in this arrangement, and the baronet offered her his arm.

“You leave us to-morrow, Mrs. Boisragon,” he said, by way of commencing a conversation, “your friends will all miss you very much.”

“They are good enough to say so,” she replied, “and I am not inclined to dispute what is so flattering to my self love. But there are others whose departure will create a far greater blank than mine. Annie, I believe, returns to Devonshire in another fortnight.”

“Indeed,” said Sir Stuart, in the tone of one whose thoughts are wandering from the subject which is being discussed.

Edith felt provoked with him for his seeming indifference ; and she said nothing more till they were quite close to the house. Then turning suddenly, and looking up

into his face, which was distinctly visible in the clear moonlight, she asked him how much longer he had to stay at Fernley.

"I scarcely know," he replied, promptly, as if this was the subject he had wished, and yet lacked courage to introduce. "It may be only for a day or two—but it may also be for a longer period. In short, there are many things—"

Here he paused, and his companion still looking up into his pale face, saw on it the traces of strong emotion.

"But when does the vessel, you are going in, sail?" she next asked, as they walked through the now deserted garden.

"It *has* sailed," he said, in a low voice. And there was a cry of gladness in Edith's heart, as, with an involuntary impulse, she pressed the hand that was so near her own, and murmured—

"God bless you both."

Sir Stuart would not join the party again; and Edith, having bade him fare-

well, just looked into the parlour to make the excuses with which he had charged her, and then, not seeing Nettia, ran upstairs and softly opened her bed-room door.

But the warm words of congratulation and affection that were glowing in her heart, became hushed ere they reached her lips, as the moonbeams, entering through the window, revealed Nettia in the humble attitude of prayer, pouring out her full soul in thanksgiving to her Father in Heaven.

Edith stood but a few seconds at the door—but, during that time, her guardian angel was at his post ; and a feeling of wonder and gratitude, fell like soft dews upon her own soul, as she recalled the words of the psalm which had first inspired her with hope on Margaret's wedding eve. The desire of her heart *had* been given her—the timid prayer she had breathed for others, had been fully

answered ; and one heavy cloud that had long obscured her destiny, was for ever passed away.

Nettia herself, when she rose from her knees, and looked out into the bright sky, as if that alone were capable of sympathizing with her joy, could scarcely have experienced more perfect contentment than Edith, standing alone in the dark passage, waiting with throbbing heart for her sister-in-law to come from her room, and be clasped in the loving arms that were already extended yearningly to receive her.

CHAPTER -XVI.

SMILES AND TEARS.

EDITH had many pleasant thoughts to beguile the tedium of her homeward journey, and contrasting her feelings now with what they had been on the first occasion of her traversing this same road, she could not but acknowledge how gently she had been dealt with, and what numberless blessings were yet scattered in her path of life. She thought its dreams had all departed, but they had in truth only changed their

nature, for never in her brightest days had her heart been busier in weaving schemes of future enjoyment, than it was at present.

Yet there was a vast difference between the former and the latter dreams, inasmuch as the first had self for their only object, and the last included little besides the hope of ministering to the happiness of others.

It was a pleasant picture that Edith drew of the bright summer that was coming on, when her mother, nursed into health by the daughter's tender care, should bestow, freely and unreservedly, that love which had hitherto been exhibited but as lightning flashes in a clouded sky. And in the back ground of this smiling picture appeared Fernley and its beloved inmates, to whom Edith fondly hoped she should persuade her mother to become known. To bring them all together, to divide her own time between them, to have one little

corner in each of their hearts—this was the resting point of her ambition, and nerved and strengthened as her spirit was at present, she did not despair of seeing it soon accomplished.

How could she despair of anything after the experiences of the last few weeks ?”

It was late in the evening when the traveller arrived at Woodleigh Cottage, but not too late for her to observe the growth of the flowers she had planted, and the general improvement which the little garden had undergone. “Mania must surely be better,” she said to herself, “or Hannah would never have had time or inclination to do all that has been done here.”

Even as this thought crossed her mind, the old woman’s wrinkled face appeared peeping from the door, and Edith, hastening up to her, enquired eagerly concerning Mrs. Lascelles.

“Oh, you’re come then, are you,” was

the answer in no amended tones, "I'm sure you're looking well, whatever other people may be ; however I'm not sorry to see you back now. This place gets more lonesome every day."

"Is mama up, Hannah?"

"Up, bless you! what should she be up for? I'm sure bed's the best place for everybody, now-a-days, if they could but think so—You can come and speak to missis when you please."

"I will come immediately," said Edith, and with a light step she followed the old servant, (who would go before to announce her arrival) to her mother's room.

It was almost dark when they went in, for the window blinds were down, and there was no candle, or any other light in the apartment ; so Edith could very imperfectly distinguish her mother's face, and it was only by the altered tones of her voice that she was led to infer that the illness Mrs. Lascelles made light of to her, had been indeed severe.

"I am glad to see you, Edith," she said, "but I hope you have not hurried your return on my account."

The tone was certainly less cold than the words ; it was sad and very tremulous, and seemed rather to denote a struggling with feeling of some kind, than the absence of it. But Edith did not remark this at the moment ; she heard only the chilling words, she missed the loving embrace, the lips that met her own appeared frozen and lifeless ; and back again to her sinking heart rushed all the fond hopes and fancies, that during the last few hours had given such a warm interest to the future. If Hannah had not been present the daughter's impulse would have been to cling round her mother's neck, and implore her to reveal the mystery of her varying conduct. But the old woman had taken a chair at the foot of the bed, and she sturdily maintained her post during the whole time Edith was in the room.

Mrs. Lascelles exerted herself to ask a

few questions concerning her daughter's visit, and the friends she had been staying with, but Edith had no heart to talk on any subject at present, and when Hannah said that her mistress must not be fatigued longer with conversation, the disappointed and now unhappy girl submitted very quietly to be turned out of the room, and spent the remainder of the evening writing melancholy letters to those she had left at Fernley.

It was some relief to her, to discover that Mary, her little, cheerful servant had returned and though Edith was too dejected to care for talking to her that night, she found her good-tempered face, and her eager efforts to please, quite refreshing, after the chilling reception she had encountered up stairs.

But the hour came when she was again left alone with her cheerless thoughts ; and when, vainly invoking sleep, she laid restlessly on her bed, or paced up and down the room, looking out into the star-lighted

heavens, and wondering if the future had nothing brighter for her, than this evening seemed to promise.

At length, exhaustion closed the weary eyes, and though not quite asleep she saw, in a half dream, a tall, white-robed figure bending over her, and heard words of passionate affection such as years ago her foolish heart had associated with the mother who was then but a beautiful and captivating vision to her—the hoarded mystery of her young and romantic heart.

Surely some pitying angel had now taken that mother's form, and was striving in a vision of the night, to console her for the disappointments of the day. But if so, she would pray to sleep for ever, that this heavenly guest might remain—remain to warm her very soul with its breathings of unutterable tenderness, its looks of deep and undying love.

Suddenly, something falling on her flushed cheek, dissolved the spell of this dream “that was not quite a dream,” and starting

up, opening wide her eyes, Edith saw with sensations impossible to describe, her real, living mother, standing by the bed ; and down her pallid face there was raining a perfect shower of tears.

On the impulse of the moment Edith grasped one of the cold hands that was resting on her pillow, and exclaimed, in a voice of the most touching sadness—

“ Oh mother, dear mother ! I dreamt that you loved me.”

Then overpowered by the excitement of her dream, and the surprise of seeing her mother really there, she too buried her face, and wept passionately.

Mrs. Lascelles had seemed, on her daughter's sudden awakening, uncertain what to do. For a few seconds she had looked half-bewildered, and half-annoyed at having aroused the sleeper ; but on Edith's seizing her hand, and saying, in that tone of sorrowful and plaintive reproach—

“ Mother, I dreamt that you loved me—”

All her doubt and irresolution vanished

in an instant, and kneeling by the bed that she might be nearer to her weeping child, she murmured—

“*Loved you, Edith!*” in a voice that arrested, as if by magic, those passionate sobs, and caused the daughter to start up and gaze incredulously into the face, on which such varying and powerful emotion was depicted.

“Mama, my own dearest mama, what is it, tell me what you mean—what I am to think?”

“To think, Edith!” repeated the mother, rising now, and sitting on the bed where she could twine her arms round her daughter, and make the burning cheek rest against her bosom, “you are to think and know, at last, my Edith, that I love you as mother never yet loved a child, that I have no thought, no hope, no dream of which you are not the one sole and cherished object—I will tell you all now, my dearest one, and together we will pray for strength—for there is a bitter trial be-

fore us, Edith—my little Edith—my own, own child.”

At each endearing epithet, Mrs. Lascelles pressed her lips fondly and lingeringly upon the soft hair and the pale forehead of her greatly agitated daughter, and drew nearer to her own the heart that was beating with such strange yet pleasurable emotion.

“I had proposed to myself,” continued the mother, “a task that has proved too hard for me. Human nature is so weak in its best intentions, and while I hold you thus in my arms I feel such perfect happiness, that there is no room in my heart for regret at the failure of my settled purpose. But all this must be a mystery to you, my Edith, so listen to your mother’s confessions, and forgive her, if you can, the unhappiness she has already, and may hereafter cause you.”

Edith, scarcely believing herself yet awake, clung closer to her mother, lest she should vanish like a phantom, leaving her

more desolate than before—And Mrs. Lascelles went on.

“ To make you fully comprehend what I have to tell you, I must begin by owning that I had weakly suffered myself to be prejudiced against you before we met—in the first instance by my own jealous heart, which bitterly resented what I imagined to be *your* refusal to come to me when I demanded you of Major Lascelles, and in the second instance, by Mrs. Armstrong, who represented you as singularly attractive and fascinating in manner, but totally deficient in warmth or sincerity of heart. I should have paid little heed to what she said, though, had I not been prepared to think you cold and artificial, but having imbibed this impression, I weakly received as truth everything that tended to confirm it. Your first letter ought to have satisfied me of my error, and removed the unfounded prejudice I had been cherishing; but it only added to my discontent, by convincing me that you were capable of affect-

tion, but that others had enjoyed and were still enjoying that which should have been mine. It was under the influence of these gloomy and jealous sentiments, that I replied, my Edith, to your generous confidences, and I have no doubt my letter must have prepared you to expect a perfect miracle of coldness and heartlessness in your mother. Such I determined then to appear to you, although I persuaded myself that in asking you to live with me I was anxious to promote your happiness as well as my own. To atone, in some degree, for this resolution to shut my heart against you, I endeavoured to obtain whatever I fancied would contribute to your external comforts, and this was the origin, I believe, of poor Hannah's enmity and dislike. She took it into her head that I could not afford what I got for you, and that your coming would excite and worry me to the injury of my health, which had for some time been rapidly failing.

"At length, Edith, you arrived—and never,

never shall I forget that moment—the moment when waking from a dream, in you had appeared to me, a proud, disdainful-looking lady of gigantic proportions—I saw, standing in the centre of the room a fair, tiny creature, with a seraph face, that would have been perfect, but for the traces of premature sorrow too legibly inscribed upon it. I have no words to describe my feelings as I gazed on you, Edith—the passionate yearning that took possession of me to draw you to my heart—to hold you there, as I am holding you now—to soothe your sorrows—to dry your tears—to whisper to you a little of the deep, deep love that was then, and for ever, kindled in my soul towards you. Ah! none but a mother could even guess what agonies I endured in thinking that your affections had been alienated from me—that strangers possessed them all—and that a cold, spiritless duty was the utmost I could ever expect from you. Edith, my child, my precious

one—you remember how I greeted you—how I repulsed your timid advances—how brutal and unnatural I appeared to you—but you knew not—and you can never know, what anguish this wilful conduct occasioned me, or what burning tears I shed that night, in reflecting that I possessed a daughter whom I must of necessity idolize—both on account of her sweet attractions and her sorrows—but who would never—never love me in return. The jealousy I had before felt against those to whom you acknowledged yourself so deeply attached, increased now to such an extent, that I could not bear the mention of their names, and this made me selfishly and cruelly discourage you from speaking of the past. Oh! my Edith, can you, indeed, forgive all that I have made you suffer?”

A few low, affectionate words from Edith, sufficed to soothe and reassure the mother, who presently continued—

“ I need not pause to relate, how, one

by one, every prejudice I had entertained against you was dissipated, or how my love for you increased day by day. For I must come now, my Edith, to the most painful part of my confessions—and Heaven, I trust, will give us courage to bow to Its will. I told you that, before you came to me, my health had, for some time, been failing—but I have, hitherto, concealed from you, that the cause of this is a disease of a generally fatal nature, which has been coming on slowly for many years past. When the hope first dawned on me, that, in spite of my assumed coldness, I was gaining your affections, the impulse of my heart was to throw aside the mask I had worn—acknowledge my foolish doubts and jealousies of your former friends, and establish a clear understanding between us. But then occurred the thought that, in the uncertain state of my health, it would be cruel to endeavour to attach you to me more warmly than you were already disposed to be. I recollected

the bitter sufferings you had undergone, I saw how you *could* love—and here for a season, the mother's unselfish affection triumphed. I determined, until I knew how my malady was likely to terminate, to keep up the character I had first appeared in, and to refrain from everything that could increase your love for me. Edith, although I have now given up my task in despair, been vanquished in the battle that was too hard for me—I must claim some merit for having, even for a time, succeeded. Who but the Searcher of hearts can tell what the struggle cost me, what tears I shed, and what prayers I breathed, and how earnestly I desired now to prolong the life which had seemed nearly worthless to me till you came to give an interest to it. In spite of all, you will remember, my Edith, that there were moments when nature *would* speak, and when this aching heart, bursting from the chains in which I had bound it, uttered a few faint notes of the love, whose full har-

mony I strove so resolutely to restrain. But, to hasten over my story, dearest—I became suddenly worse, and the physician, whom I had constantly consulted since my residence here, (and to whom those secret visits were paid, which, I believe, excited the curiosity of your little servant,) this physician strongly advised an operation, and I only hesitated in the fear that your apprehensions would be aroused, should it come to your knowledge, which I saw no means of preventing while you remained in the house.

“ At this time, dearest, your sister’s invitation arrived, and I could not but rejoice in the opportunity thus offered of sparing you a participation in the suspense and anxieties inseparable from the ordeal I was to go through. You mistook my satisfaction on this account, for pleasure, at the prospect of getting rid of you. Ah, my Edith, you should have read your mother’s heart, when she was contemplating the possibility of dying before you could re-

turn to her. This was the agony of the parting, amid which I could not altogether hide the strong and fervent affection you had inspired—an affection that had awakened all the warmth and fire of my nature, and proved to me how different, with a child to love, my whole life might have been.

“But now, my darling, my sweet, fond girl, you must nerve your soul for one more trial, in addition to those you have already had. You are prepared for it, dearest, you tremble and weep, my Edith ; but, for your mother’s sake, *your dying mother*, you will pray and strive for courage and resignation. And, oh forgive me, beloved, that I have exposed you to a scene like this, that, nearly maddened by the struggle to meet you coldly, I could not resist coming, when I thought you sleeping, to gaze on those dear features, and to pray beside your bed. You *will* forgive my weakness, Edith, you will pity your unhappy mother, you will console her with

your precious affection, during the few weeks or months she may yet have to suffer earthly pain."

Mrs. Lascelles passed here, overcome by her own emotion, and the sobs and passionate lamentations of her heart-stricken child. This woe was so sudden and unlooked-for: it had come, too, when she was so little prepared for it—at a time, when the stormy waters having just been hushed, a few faint gleams of sunshine were beginning to be reflected in the still half restless waves. Did it not seem hard that a spirit should arise and dispel at a word this welcome but treacherous calm, and that the mighty winds of Heaven should be again let loose, to scare away the cheering sunbeams, and lash into renewed fury the tired and lately panting waves."

"Mama, mama, tell me this is not true; that there is yet some hope, however small, that you will not leave your child who loves you so—your little Edith."

“My little Edith, indeed—my own heart’s treasure! would that I might die ten thousand deaths to spare you the sufferings of the present moment. But I dare not deceive you. The operation, instead of arresting, has increased the progress of this fatal disorder, which had gone too far to be subject to human skill. My bodily pain, however, is less unendurable than it *was*. At times, I do not feel it at all—now, I do not feel it, my Edith, I only feel that you are in my arms, and that you love and pity your poor, poor mother.”

“But, mama, you should not be here. How wickedly thoughtless and selfish I have been to forget that you have not left your bed before. Ah, dearest mother, how pale and cold you are. Come back to your own room, and let me watch beside your bed—henceforth, this must be my privilege alone, and Heaven will yet listen to my prayers for your recovery. We will have more doctors—the best advice than can be obtained—the—”

"Saints defend us !" exclaimed old Hannah, in an incensed voice, suddenly bursting like a thunder cloud into the room. "Did any christian woman ever live with such people as these. But, I'm glad, madam," (exchanging her angry tone for an ironical one,) "I'm very glad that you find yourself so much better to-night. You'll be able to walk to London and back to-morrow, I'm thinking. And I'll be sure to send word to the doctor the first thing in the morning, that he need not come again. Oh dear, these are changes to be sure !"

"My good Hannah," replied Mrs. Lascelles, rising with evident difficulty, and drawing a shawl she had on closer round her, "I acknowledge the imprudence of which I have been guilty—and you are correct in saying that there are changes here. For I have confessed everything to my beloved Edith, and my heart is the lighter for it. I will, however, return with you now, and endeavour to sleep. In the

morning, dearest," to her daughter, "we shall meet again, and I will not send you from me with cold words, as I did this evening. Heaven bless and watch over you, my darling child—we shall yet have, I trust, a few happy hours together. And now, Hannah, give me the support of your arm, and we will go."

Edith sat up the remainder of that night, and watched the pale stars disappearing one by one from the gradually brightening sky. And as the thought occurred to her, that thus her dreams of life were receding fast in the distance, she prayed silently that their departure might be the means of purifying and brightening her soul, even as the going out of those shining stars was succeeded by the rising of the far more glorious sun of day.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LAST PARTING.

THE following morning, of course, found Mrs. Lascelles much worse, and Hannah, devotedly attached as she was to her mistress, could not resist saying many bitter things, and recurring, constantly, to the mad trick, (as she called it), of which the invalid had been guilty. And both mother and daughter endured her querulousness with infinite patience now, because they had their mutual affection and long de-

layed confidences to engross all their thoughts, and to render them forgetful of everything else—sometimes, even of the bitter doom which threatened them.

The mother faithfully kept her promise, and Edith became her constant nurse and attendant. There were no more cold looks, no more chilling words, nothing but that pure and holy love, which creates for itself an atmosphere of happiness, in whatever place it entereth. The only fear was that the mother, on the threshold of eternity, was erecting an idol in her heart, which would cause

“—— that brighter world to disappear
Or seem less lovely, and its hopes less dear.”

But she was quite conscious of her weakness, and struggled resolutely against it, while Edith's fervent attachment and admiring reverence for her no longer mysterious mother, increased day by day.

Hannah who would not be driven altogether out of the sick room, was never weary of descanting on the virtues of her mistress, or of relating to Edith the numerous acts of self denial Mrs. Lascelles had practised to enable her to receive her daughter in the way she had done.

“And was it not enough to make me wild,” the old woman would say, “to see you, who was young and strong, with comforts of all sorts about you, while poor missis, in a dying state, scarce allowed herself common necessities. I know you didn’t think of how little money your mother had, and I was forbid to mention it, even, on pain of being sent about my business; but, as I’m a christian woman, that great dog you brought, has cost me many and many a sleepless night—Oh dear! how he *did* eat, and how outrageous missis used to get, if I dared to say a word about it.”

“I was very, very thoughtless Hannah,” Edith would reply meekly on these occa-

sions—"but you must forgive all my offences now, as mama has done; and I will try to do nothing that can make you wild in future."

About three days after Edith's return, she was one morning summoned down stairs, at an early hour, to receive cousin Joseph, and Nero. They both appeared delighted to see her, and the former begged for permission to renew occasionally his evening visits, as all the rest of the family, he said, had gone to the sea side for the summer, and he was very dull at home.

"But why did you not accompany them?" Edith asked, without being greatly interested in the answer.

Joseph hesitated, blushed a good deal, and at last said only—

"I had no inclination to go."

"Yet London must be getting insufferably hot, I should imagine," rejoined his companion, too much preoccupied to notice his manner.

"Yes, certainly—Oh it's like a furnace.

But may I come here again sometimes, just to see you, and to look after the garden."

"Indeed I should have been most happy to have you," said Edith, kindly, "but that mama is too ill to leave her room; and I would not for the world be away from her."

Joseph looked deeply hurt and disappointed, and just as Edith was going to say something to soften the pain of this refusal, old Hannah opened the door, and nodding familiarly to cousin Joseph, said (addressing Edith)—

"If you please, ma'am, your mama begs you will ask Mr. Armstrong to come sometimes of an evening, to take you for a walk. She says she won't have you stay at home so much as you do. And missis is much obliged to you, sir, (turning to Joseph) for the last beautiful flowers you brought, and for the pains you have taken with the garden. I'm sure it's not every young gentleman who would have come all this distance,

just to dig and rake in a bit of a garden like our's, and never have a soul to speak to, but a cross old woman, who has little enough time for gossip, either. But good morning to you, Mr. Joseph, and I hope we'll very soon see you here again."

"Is it possible, Joseph," said Edith, when the door had closed on the suddenly eloquent Hannah, "that it was you who beautified the garden in my absence? I am really so astonished that I scarcely know how to thank you—But why did you give yourself so much trouble? Poor mama will never, I fear, enjoy it now."

"I thought *you* would like to see it nice when you came back," said Joseph, with perfect sincerity, "and this idea made the labour very pleasant to me, Edith."

"Indeed you are excessively kind and excessively gallant," replied his cousin, with a faint smile—"and I can do no less than second mama's invitation, after all you have done for me. So will you come with my poor old Nero to-morrow evening?

and perhaps we may be able to have a little walk."

It is scarcely necessary to chronicle Joseph's reply, or the expression of heartfelt satisfaction that shone on his good-looking face, as Edith gave him her hand, and bade him remember his engagement.

"I really think, Hannah," said Mrs. Lascelles, that afternoon, "that I might get up for an hour or two to-day. I have quite a yearning to look at the blue sky once more, and to feel the summer breeze upon my cheek. I should so much enjoy sitting in my easy chair by the window ; and it could not possibly do me any harm."

Edith was of the same opinion, so the old servant's caution was overruled by their united pleadings, and the invalid obtained her desire, which, far from doing harm, made her fancy herself, at least, so much better, that the next day she insisted on going down to her daughter's

little sitting-room, and taking tea with Edith and her guest.

Whether Joseph appreciated this kind effort on the part of his elder cousin to do him honour, I am not prepared to say, but Edith rejoiced sincerely at her mother's presence, and the contemplated walk was abandoned, that they might devote themselves exclusively to her who had been so long condemned to weary hours of solitude and suffering.

To atone to Joseph for his disappointment about the walk, which he was not quite successful in concealing, Edith offered to sing to him; and as she had never even tried her voice since that fatal evening in the heather-dell, this was no slight proof of her willingness to sacrifice her own feelings for the gratification of others.

Joseph was of course delighted, and beyond measure grateful for this kindness; but he had heard his cousin's exquisite voice before, and it consequently produced no startling effect upon him. It was the

mother—she who for the last twenty years had dwelt in a sort of imaginary world, where feeling and sentiment alone were real—into whose heart those dreamy melodies sank with such a thrilling power.

And from this time a new and delicious source of pleasure was opened to the dying woman, whose bodily strength appeared to rally strangely under the quiet, undisturbed enjoyment of the present days. The long, bright summer days, which her daughter's talents and affection cheered, and which seemed all too quickly hurrying on towards that night to which there comes no morrow.

Mrs. Lascelles, with the doctor's sanction, often had her couch or easy chair brought into the little sunny garden now, and with Edith on one side of her, and cousin Joseph—who had grown at last to be considered as belonging to the family—on the other, she looked and felt far happier than she had ever done in all her life before.

Hannah too was considerably elated by

her mistress's increased cheerfulness and apparently improved health. The deep wrinkles on her brow began to smooth, the harshness of her voice to subside, and smiles occasionally to appear on her thin lips as she contemplated the quiet trio, with old Nere basking in the sun at their feet, and had "thoughts" about some of them, which she wisely kept to herself, or only gave expression to in obscure hints to Edith's little Mary, who had a very easy life of it at present, and asked nothing better than that all things should remain as they were.

But the secret counsels of Omnipotence had otherwise ordained; and too soon there came a time when every flattering symptom of returning health, which had well nigh cheated the invalid herself, suddenly and for ever disappeared, banishing to his own solitary home one of that lately happy party, and condemning the others to close and ceaseless confinement in a sick

room, from which the bright sunshine was to be altogether shut out.

These were days of sorrow and darkness, unrelieved by a single ray of that blessed hope which has power to brighten the gloomiest prison-house, and to make earth's bitterest trials endurable. The mother and daughter, who had too late discovered the inexpressible sweetness of kindred affection, might indeed look forward to a re-union after death, in those lands where sorrow and pain would be no more—but they knew that in this world their very hours of communion were numbered, and the mother felt with poignant grief that her beloved and already deeply-stricken child would never find again an affection so devoted and exclusive as her own—that her “little Edith” with her strange beauty, and not entirely conquered faults, was about to be thrown on the world again, and exposed to a thousand temptations, which became magnified in that fond

mother's anxious forebodings, into positive and alarming dangers.

"My Edith," she said one day, when a strong dose of morphine had deadened for awhile the acuteness of her sufferings. "My Edith, tell me what you intend to do, when I have left you for ever. It will relieve me greatly, dearest, to know your plans for the future."

"Mama," was the agitated reply, "I have formed no plans dependent on your leaving me. But of course I should not remain alone. My sister's home would always be open to me."

"True, my dearest," said Mrs. Lascelles, after the pause of a few minutes. "But I do not think, Edith, that you would be satisfied to reside for a permanency in anybody's home, however dear its possessor might be to you. There is still a slight degree of restlessness in your nature, and it is this that makes me anxious on your account"

"How, mama? Tell me frankly what you mean?"

"That you are too young and attractive, my Edith, to wander about the world alone. That I could have left you with a calmer mind had I seen a prospect of your becoming united to a husband who would watch over you, and love you as I once hoped to have done. You are yet but a girl in years, and almost a child in appearance, and I shrink nervously from the thoughts of leaving you without a natural protector."

"Dearest mother," said Edith, in a low voice, "I never could—no, I am quite sure I never *could* marry again. The very mention of it recalls that mournful ceremony, and its awful termination, and sends a thrill of horror through me; no, no; anything but this."

Mrs. Lascelles pressed her daughter's hand, and sighed wearily.

"You are in pain, dearest mama."

Not bodily pain, my Edith. I was only thinking of you—not of your past life, which will soon appear but as a dream to you, but of that future which is yet hidden from our eyes, and which, I candidly confess, my imagination surrounds with dangers and perils innumerable. How are you to escape these, my poor little lamb, without a shepherd to protect and defend you ?”

“I see none of the perils you anticipate, dear mama ; but supposing their existence, I should really be puzzled where to look for the protector.”

“Should you indeed, Edith ?”

“Undoubtedly. I do not know a creature—surely, surely mama, you cannot be thinking of Joseph Armstrong ?”

And as Edith spoke an almost indignant blush dyed her pale face, and proved that perfect humility was still to be acquired, in spite of the rough and persevering lessons of experience.

“My own dearest girl,” said the dying

mother, already nearly exhausted by this short conversation. "Heaven forbid that I should ever urge you to marry one you could not at least esteem and honour. I certainly had imagined that you were aware of your cousin's devoted attachment, and that you did not entirely discourage it. But I see now that I was wrong, so I can only pray that you may find peace and happiness in whatever path of life your own inclination leads you to choose—I am very weary now, dearest, and I will try to sleep."

* * * * *

It was nearly a week after this, and no change in the invalid's state had taken place, unless hourly increasing weakness may be counted as a change. A few dull, rainy days had been succeeded by one of almost overpowering heat, and towards

evening, poor Edith, half-fainting from her long confinement in the close room, was persuaded by Hannah to go down into the garden, and breathe, for a few minutes, the pure air of heaven.

She wandered about for some time amongst the sweetly smelling flowers, too unhappy and bewildered for distinct thought, either of the present or the future, but conscious of a sensation of physical refreshment, that was akin to pleasure when contrasted with all that she had endured during the day. A cooler breeze had now sprung up and was whispering gently amid the branches of the old fruit trees, and fanning the burning cheek of the weary and solitary girl, who was perfectly indifferent at present to the many luxuries and enchantments that nature and summer had scattered so bountifully around her.

The only object to which Edith frequently raised her heavy eyes was the half open window of her dying mother's room, from whence Hannah had promised to

make a signal to her the moment any change in the sufferer took place.

And at length the expected summons came. In a voice scarcely audible from emotion, the old servant called to Edith to hasten without delay to her mother, and in another minute the parent and child were locked in a close and lingering embrace, while the stillness of the sick room was broken by a daughter's involuntary cry of anguish and despair.

"Oh, mama, mama, is it indeed so near?—Are we to part for ever?—Can nothing—nothing prolong your precious life?"

"My Edith, my beloved one, no!—The last struggle is approaching. This world and all things in it are growing dim—all but you, whose image is still reflected brightly and purely in my heart—as brightly and purely as it ever was—Ah, how little you can guess of my love for you or of the unimaginable bitterness of this parting—increased as it is tenfold, by my anxie-

ties concerning your future fate. Yet, my Edith; I can only say to you—commit your ways unto the Father of the fatherless ; and rest all your cares upon Him. The world will disappoint and forsake you ; the dreams of youth will fade in the realities of life ; everything, whether of joy or sorrow, will soon be as nothing, except as far as it has helped or retarded your pilgrimage to the promised land. Think of this, my beloved child, when the voice that now speaks shall be hushed for ever. Remember then that your mother's last solemn warning to you, was to act at all times without reference to present or personal enjoyment, but as becometh one who is seeking a better country.—And, Edith, pray constantly, pray without ceasing, in happiness or affliction always pray—My child, my darling, I am growing faint—Pray now.”

The trembling daughter knelt by the bed side, but her white lips had no power to utter any distinguishable sounds. Her hands grasped those of the dying woman,

and held them in a convulsive pressure, while her eyes were fixed strainingly on that beloved but rapidly changing face, which was so soon to be for ever hidden from her gaze.

Not a sound disturbed now the awful silence of the room, not a voice was raised either in lamentation or in prayer, though both were in the hearts of those dumb watchers for the flight of an immortal soul. The daughter and the aged servant, closely associated in this hour of sorrow, looked vainly in each other's faces for hope or consolation. What hope or consolation could be imparted by those who saw the King of Terrors hovering over his prey—and saw not, for the grief that dimmed their eyes, that he had bright wings like an angel's, and that on his face was written "Love."

Yes, it was love, Almighty Love, that calmed for ever that anxious heart, that relieved for ever those mortal pangs. It was love, Almighty Love, that sent His messenger to bring home that wearied

spirit, and that summoned it, with the accents of undying affection, with the words "my little Edith," on its lips, to the mansions of Eternal rest and blessedness.

"Peace, peace, to the holy dead !

* * * * *

Strength, courage to the living."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE COUSINS.

A month had passed since the death of Mrs. Lascelles, but summer was still in its glorious prime ; and though Edith had never felt disposed to try the effect of air and sunshine beyond the garden gates—she was beginning now, in the quiet evenings, to come out amongst her drooping flowers, or to sit with a book within the shady porch of the cottage, while poor Hannah, completely subdued and broken-

hearted, generally hovered near the spot, talking of her dear, departed mistress.

They had been very solitary during this month of mourning—for though Joseph Armstrong had called every day for the first fortnight, Edith had constantly excused herself from seeing him—and when his visits suddenly ceased, Hannah stood up stoutly in his defence, and declared that he had been most cruelly treated.

“I am sorry,” Edith had said, “very sorry—but what what can I do, Hannah, now?”

“Do! why write to the young gentleman, to be sure, and ask him to come and say good-bye to you, at least. You couldn’t be intending to go away without seeing him again, I should *think*.”

“Of course not—besides, there is my old Nero. I shall certainly take him with me. Well, perhaps, I had better write.”

And she did so, that very day, begging

her cousin to come and see her, and to bring the dog he had kindly taken charge of, as she was anxious to have him under her own care again.

To this letter there came no reply ; and when, at the expiration of another week, Edith heard nothing of her cousin, she began to feel quite uneasy, and to be always wondering what had become of him, or whether he could really be offended at her repeated refusals to admit him, on the occasions of his friendly visits.

"I'm sure I hope no harm's come to Mister Joseph," said Hannah, one bright evening when Edith, having been busy with her packing during the day, had brought a book of poems and was sitting in an attitude of languid dejection under the porch before mentioned. "For, although *some people* don't make much account of him, he's been from the first, a favourite of mine—and so he was with my poor, dear misses, who looked more to the heart than to the outward shew,—though, for that

matter, I can't think what people *would* have, if they find fault with Mr. Joseph's appearance. To my mind, he's as handsome a young gentleman as one could wish to see."

"He is, indeed," replied Edith, absently, for her thoughts had been wandering all the time Hannah was speaking.

"Well," rejoined the old woman, "it's a pity you didn't find out that before—because my firm belief is, that we shall never set eyes upon his pleasant face again. Do you put any faith in dreams, ma'am?"

"Very little, Hannah," said Edith, making an effort now to fix her attention. "But why do you ask? Have you had a dream?"

"Yes; and one that I don't like at all, about Mister Joseph. I thought I saw him with a pistol in his hand, and when I ran forward to snatch it from him he pointed it at his own heart, and immediately fell down a corpse. I called you come to me

and when you stood beside the dead body; its eyes turned and gave you such a look. Oh, ma'am! if you had but seen it, you never could have forgot it—not a look of anger or anything like that—but a look of sorrowful love and kindness, that forced big tears from your eyes and mine. I awoke crying, and was afraid to go to sleep again. Such dreams as these are sometimes sent as warnings, in my opinion."

"My good Hannah," said Edith, "you must not encourage superstition. Depend on it, your favourite will be preserved from so horrible a fate. But it was a frightful dream—and I am weak enough to wish you had not told it me."

A few minutes after this, they were both startled by the sudden ringing of the garden bell, and Edith, hoping it might be the postman, begged Hannah to hasten to the gate, that her anxiety might be relieved.

It turned out, however, to be the miss-

ing gentleman himself ; and his cousin, prepared for his appearance by a loud and joyful exclamation from the old servant, rose somewhat nervously to meet and welcome him.

On Joseph's part, it was evident that pleasure at this meeting predominated over every other feeling, even over his habitual shyness in Edith's presence ; and the latter had been sufficiently anxious about his long silence, to share these sentiments of satisfaction, in a slight degree, and to shew, too, that she did so.

" Why, Joseph, we really thought something dreadful had happened to you, or that you had made a vow never to enter Woodleigh Cottage again. It is quite a relief to see you—and my poor old Nero, too. How pleased he seems."

Such was Edith's greeting ; and Joseph quickly explained that he had only that morning received her note, having been unexpectedly summoned from town on

family business of importance—amidst which, he had neglected to give any orders concerning the letters that might arrive during his absence.

“Then you were not offended with me, Joseph, for refusing to see you before,” said Edith, leading the way to the pleasant seat she had just left. “Indeed, I was far too miserable and dejected for the first week or two, to think of being polite. I treated you as relative and friend, in sending you away so unceremoniously.

“You did quite right, Edith,” said Joseph, sitting down beside his cousin. “But now, if I may venture upon the *privileges* of a relative and friend, where are you going, and what are your plans for the future?”

Edith smiled slightly, as she replied,

“I am going for the present, to reside with my sister Mrs. Howard. For the future I have no plans; it must take care of itself.”

Joseph stooped to pat old Nero, and went on with his questions.

“Do you take Hannah with you into the country, or does she remain here?”

“She will remain at the cottage for the present—because, in the first place, I should not know what to do with her elsewhere, having, long ago, promised to keep my little Mary as my personal attendant—and in the second place, because I am thinking seriously of purchasing Woodleigh Cottage and making it my own home eventually. That which my dear mother esteemed grand enough for herself, will surely be so for her daughter ; and of course, I would not, for the whole world, part with a single thing that belonged to her.”

“Certainly not ; that is very natural. But, would not this place be excessively dull for you to live in alone ? I really don’t think you would like it.”

“Well, this is for future consideration. I should not feel disposed to enter upon such a solitary existence, at present. I

long most ardently to be with Margaret, again."

"You have had a great deal of suffering, Edith."

"Not more, nay not half so much as I deserved. I could bear patiently enough my own share of sorrow, if I was not constantly oppressed with the thought that I have been the occasion of bitter sufferings to others."

Joseph stroked Nero again, and remained silent.

"It seems quite selfish to deprive you of the dog just as you have become attached to him," said Edith, after watching her companion for a few minutes.

"Not at all—how can you say so. How could any action of yours be counted selfish, Edith?"

He said this very fast and nervously, as though the observation to which it was the answer, had roused him from thoughts of an exciting and agitating nature. And Edith replied.

"You either flatter greatly or you do not know me, Joseph—Oh I fear I am very selfish still, in spite of the bitter lesson I have learnt."

"What makes you think so—what act or resolution has suggested such a supposition now, Edith? not the very natural desire to have Nero back, surely?"

"Yes, partly that," said the dog's mistress, stooping, in her turn, to caress the favourite. "But there are many things that convince me I am dreadfully selfish. I wish indeed it were not so; that I could follow the counsels of my beloved mother, and act on all occasions without reference to present or personal enjoyment. I am sure I should be happier for it in the end."

"When do you go?" asked Joseph, in such a sudden manner that Edith was quite startled; and she looked up from Nero's shaggy coat to her cousin's face, and saw that it was pale with emotion.

"I have two more days to be here," she

replied in a kind and soothing voice. For she certainly knew now that her companion was interested in no common degree about all that concerned herself.

“ May I come again, Edith, before you leave ?”

She hesitated a moment, and then said, in rather a rapid manner, “ If you like—if you really wish it—If you think it—”

Joseph caught up the word, “ If I think it *prudent*, Edith—that is what you would say—if I dare risk my peace of mind, and brave, as I used to do, the torments your indifference inflicted upon me. I have more powers of endurance than you give me credit for, Edith, and after suffering silently for two long years, I shall not shrink from an ordeal of a few hours. The happiness of being with you far outweighs the pain of your indifference, to which I have grown accustomed, if not reconciled—Edith, dear Edith, do you remember this ?”

As Joseph spoke he took a small folded

piece of delicate paper from his pocket, and opening it with trembling fingers drew out a long curl of shining hair.

Edith did indeed remember it well, and as she gazed, the last two years with all their varied scenes of pleasure and of suffering rolled back, and presented to her view the one in which that lock of hair had been asked for and presented, while the hopes and fears of that happy time rushed like a flood into her soul, and filled her eyes with burning tears. It was not Joseph Armstrong or his boyish passion converted into a true manly devotion, that she was thinking of now. It was of herself, as she had been then, of the pleasant romance of her petted youth, of all its fair dreams and visions, and of those two who had played such important parts in the strange drama of her life. Of Alick Boisson, far away in his lonely grave, and of Stuart Bernarde yearning, like herself, to make atonement for the past, but bereft or ever of individual enjoyment. If

another phanton mingled with these, it was that of the broken-hearted mother, whose curse, whether felt or spoken, still lay heavy on the soul of her who had inspired it.

But in all these thoughts of "the time that was no more," Joseph Armstrong came not. Came not, although he sat beside her, and held in his hand the shining curl which had acted as a magic mirror in bringing before its owner's sight these moving shapes of the buried past.

Yet how should Joseph know this? He did *not* know it, or even guess it, and, therefore, Edith's tears and agitation emboldened him to speak, though there was still more of the recklessness of despair, than of the confidence of hope in his voice and manner.

"Edith, if this dark curl had the gift of utterance, it might tell you a tale of constant affection that would win pity, at least, from your tender heart. It might

tell you how long a time love can exist, uncheered by the faintest ray of hope, and how this love may grow, at last, into an intense desire to promote the happiness of the beloved object. Edith, if I am selfish, in speaking of my own feelings now, you must forgive me, in consideration of the patient silence I have hitherto preserved. It is a consolation to show you the most secret emotions of the heart that has been yours so very long, and to tell you that you have a friend whom nothing can ever change. Will you regard me as such, dearest Edith? will you look upon me as your brother until one more fortunate than myself shall possess a better right to act for you, and devote his life to your service?"

Edith had not listened to her cousin's confession without emotion. Her eyes, which had been fixed on his face, when he first began speaking, were now turned quite away, and there was a deep red spot upon

both her cheeks, too settled and changeless to encourage the idea that love, or anything akin to love, had placed it there. Promptly, however, and half raising her face to that of her companion, she replied—

“I will not pretend to be surprised at what you have been telling me, nor yet attempt to disguise the regret with which I have heard it. Joseph, you said just now, that I had gone through a great deal of suffering, and I spoke the pure truth in assuring you that it is the sufferings I have occasioned others, that lay heaviest on my soul. Even towards you I feel that I have not been blameless. Formerly, it was my vanity that made me selfish and inconsiderate; latterly, my misfortunes have had the same effect; but I am anxious, as far as I can, to atone for, as well as acknowledge my faults. You know all my past history, Joseph; but you miscalculate, perhaps, the impressions produced on me

by those events which stand out prominently in this dreary record. You think, probably, that I shall be enabled, after a time, to look upon the past, as only an episode in my life, and begin, with renewed hopes and freshened feelings, another search for earthly happiness. Your suggestion, concerning the probability of my marrying again, leads me to ascribe these ideas to you, and I earnestly wish to set you right in the matter. Joseph, I *know* that I can never love anybody in the way I once thought it indispensable to love the man I should marry, and till very, very recently, I did not believe it possible that I could, for a moment, entertain the idea of having another husband. It seems, or did seem, to me, that I am altogether unfitted to contribute to the happiness of one who is only entering life, who has not yet been awakened from its beautiful but unreal dreams, and who still views all things through the glittering veil of youth

and romance. If it were not for this mistrust of myself, this dread of falling so far short of the imaginary picture you have drawn of me, I would try, Joseph, to atone to you for your sufferings on my account ; but, I fear, I greatly fear, you have invested me with fictitious power, and that you would find me a most uncongenial companion, and wife."

There was certainly nothing in all this that could flatter, in the smallest degree, the self-love of the person to whom it was addressed, and, but for the known fact of Joseph Armstrong being a "fond and foolish lover," it would be quite impossible to account for the flush of joy that mounted from his cheek to his forehead, and glowed brightly there, as his cousin ceased speaking.

"Edith," he said, replying even more promptly than she had done, "if you really mean this, and have not spoken on the impulse of the moment, I shall be

happier, far happier than words can express. I want words now, to explain my feelings; to convince you how little cause there is for the fear you talk of. Dear Edith, I never was romantic, I never saw life but in its plain, every-day dress. The only beautiful dream I ever had was inspired by yourself. You know it; you must know, too, that could I attain to the supreme happiness of calling you my wife, it would be impossible for any want to be felt on *my* side. I might indeed be oppressed at times with a painful consciousness of my own vast inferiority—but in every other respect, dearest Edith, I should esteem myself the most enviable being on earth."

There were many light and floating clouds upon that summer evening's sky, but through them all was seen the pure azure of the calm heavens, unsullied, undimmed by these earthly vapours, which would soon pass over and be for ever gone.

There was a cloud, too, upon Edith'

fair and girlish face, through which it was impossible to look into the depths of her secret heart. If peace and serenity were really there, they were hidden for the moment by the passing of this earthly vapour, that had somewhat of a heavy, spiritless aspect, as though it meant to abide, or at least to tarry on its way.

"Let us dismiss this subject for the present," she said, in a tone that ill-corresponded with that of her cousin-lover. "For though I did not speak on the impulse of a momentary feeling—it is indeed time that I abjure impulses for ever—still, Joseph, you will agree with me that it is yet too soon to enter into engagements for the future, or to take a near view of that which I merely glanced at as a possibility to occur hereafter—But understand me distinctly," she continued, in a less constrained tone, and turning her softening eyes kindly on her cousin. "If time and reflection should persuade me that I can promote your happiness, and satisfy my

own conscience by acceding to your wishes, I will unhesitatingly do so. In any case, Joseph, take my solemn assurance that if I do not become your wife I shall live and die in my present condition. Forgive me if I have appeared colder or less kind than I intended, or than I really feel—My thoughts are troubled and confused to-night."

Perhaps Joseph might have said the same now, without departing widely from the truth. But he said nothing more, being content to sit by Edith's side, gazing frequently but stealthily into her pensive face, while he stroked or patted Nero with a perseverance that was evidently more astonishing than gratifying to the sleepy animal.

How long both the cousins might have sat, oblivious of time, in that rose and jessamine covered porch, it is quite impossible to say—but the sun was very near its setting, and the clouds had left the blue sky above them clear and bright, when

Hannah suddenly presented herself at the open door, and said, in a particularly unromantic tone—

“ I’ve been getting some supper ready for you both. Now do come in and have it.”

CHAPTER XX.

NETTIE'S DESTINY.

“ To think, Margey, my own dear Margey, that after all it should come to this ! Does it not seem strange and unaccountable even to you, when you recollect what I was, and how foolishly and wildly I used to talk and dream ? ”

“ Dream—ah, there it is, Edith. You spent all your youth in dreaming, and you will have to employ your womanhood in awaking thoroughly. Once completely

aroused, you will look steadily and courageously into real life, and create your own happiness in the midst of it."

"I thought I had been thoroughly awakened long ago. I get more mystified over the difficult problem of my own nature every day. I am sick of myself, Margey, if you can understand that."

"I believe I can, dear Edith; and this observation brings us back to the point from whence I started, long, long ago, when I told you, in speaking of your imaginary destinies, that the one I should choose for you would be in the midst of a bustling, active world, where you would be forcibly taken out of yourself, and made to think and act for others. Do you remember the argument we held on the occasion to which I refer?"

"I do indeed," said Edith, very sadly; "and that the fanciful portrait I drew of the husband I should, above all others, shrink from, was suggested by my idea of what Joseph Armstrong would be in

middle age. How strange, how passing strange it seems that this very man is to be my husband, after all."

"You are not yet engaged, Edith. You can easily withdraw the vague hope you held out to him, if you doubt the wisdom of what you have done. In a case like this, no third party can advise."

"Dear Margey, you misunderstand me. I do not waver in my intention, nor doubt its prudence in the slightest degree. I feel too, with you, that I never could be even moderately happy without some definite object in life, and as this seems the one clearly pointed out to me, I do not dream for an instant of evading it; only, there are times when the past presses so heavily upon me, that the present and the future appear almost as strange and dark as that has been. Let us join Charles in the garden now."

Edith had been a fortnight at the Rectory, when the above conversation took place; but she had always, till this even-

ing, lacked courage to speak to Margaret about her cousin's attachment, or the hopes she had given him the night they sat together in the porch of Woodleigh Cottage.

Margaret had received the communication with a mingling of astonishment and satisfaction—astonishment because Edith had scarcely ever mentioned Joseph's name to her of late; and satisfaction because she felt that her sister required new objects of interest to divert her mind from dwelling on past events. Besides this, Joseph Armstrong had long ago excited Margaret's sympathy, and she believed that he was much more calculated to render Edith happy than either of those her girlish heart had selected. The steadiness of his attachment was, too, a strong plea in his favour, and Mrs. Howard had herself found matrimony so very delightful that she could not help desiring earnestly to see her darling sister following in her footsteps.

"To be sure," she thought, as they

walked slowly to the sunny spot where her husband was tying up some roses, "Joseph Armstrong is not Charles Howard; but then dear Charles is one in ten thousand, and I have been so very, very fortunate."



It was undoubtedly the daily contemplation of the exceeding happiness of her sister and brother that reconciled Edith to the thoughts of a married life, and if at times it occurred to her, as it had done to the fond wife, that Joseph Armstrong was not Charles Howard, she immediately recalled and dwelt upon the long-tried affection of the former, and thus silenced all invidious and unwise comparisons.

About two months after her arrival at the Rectory, she generously put her lover out of his misery, by writing to inform him that at the expiration of her twelvemonth's

outward mourning for her mother, she would become his wife. To no one did Edith ever confess how strongly that beloved mother's dying wishes had influenced her in accepting her cousin.

As soon as might be after the receipt of this letter, Joseph made his appearance at the rectory, bringing with him a multitude of friendly messages from his family, and an expression of happiness on his own countenance, that bid fair to rival even those radiant looks and smiles, for which the young rector had so long been justly celebrated.

"He is a dear, good creature," said Margaret to her sister, at the conclusion of the first evening Joseph had spent with them. "And it will certainly be your own fault if you are not as happy with him as I am with Charles."

"I am glad to see him get on so well with your husband," replied Edith. "It is a proof that Joseph can both discern and

appreciate excellence, which, from his determined constancy to myself, I had almost begun to doubt."

"You are a strange girl," said Margaret, with a smile and a kiss. "I believe to attain the highest point in your good graces it would be necessary for your lover to despise and trample upon you, to the utmost extent of his ability."

"Don't drive me back, dear Margaret, to the hopeless problem of my own heart. I have quite done with myself, and intend to make others, with Joseph at the head of the list, my study for the future."

That Edith kept this resolution, may be inferred from the fact of her esteem gradually increasing for her intended husband, who remained several weeks at Fernley, and won the warm hearts of many of the good people there—the Cargills being, of course, amongst the foremost of his admirers. Miss Eliza was in a state of large excitement

and delight, at the thoughts of another wedding at Fernley—and it was even said that she had, on various occasions, employed all her rhetoric (which was not a little) in trying to coax Margaret into letting the breakfast take place at the cottage under her own superintendence. But as there were still about nine months to elapse before the marriage would be celebrated, it is probable that Mrs. Howard did not pay any serious attention to the worthy lady's request.

During the time that Joseph remained at Fernley, Mrs. Armstrong wrote a very civil letter to Edith, inviting her to come and pass a month or two with them in London. But this was, with many thanks, firmly declined,—for though Edith had learned to compare Joseph with Alick Boisragon, without much injury to the former, she felt that the contrast between the two mothers would be particularly unfavourable to the present repose of mind

she had, with such earnest efforts, and so many prayers, attained.

It was not till the following spring, that anything occurred to ruffle the tranquil stream of events at Fernley ; and then, Margaret, accompanied by Mr. Simeon Cargill, undertook a journey into Devonshire, to be present at the marriage of Sir Stuart Bernarde and Miss Egerton. Mr. Howard achieved a great victory over his own inclinations when he gave permission for his dear wife to leave him, even for a fortnight ; But Margaret considered herself bound by an old promise to her friend ; and Edith, too, was exceedingly anxious that she should go.

Both Miss Cargill and her sister came to stay at the rectory in the absence of its mistress—and it required all their exertions, combined with those of Edith, to keep up the husband's spirit, and persuade him that no extraordinary convulsions of nature were taking place, to effect the destruction of his Margaret, with whom he

was, of course, in daily correspondence from the moment of her arrival.

The period fixed for her return, was hailed with very general satisfaction—for all were curious to hear the particulars of Nettia's long-delayed wedding—and Edith's interest in the matter was of no slight or common kind.

It was, however, an affair of considerable difficulty, to speak even one word to Margaret on the evening of her arrival, for the husband greedily monopolized the whole of his wife's attention, and shewed no indulgence for the keen female curiosity (as he deemed it) which was put upon the rack by this very unreasonable conduct on his part.

"I will tell you everything, by-and-bye," was Mrs. Howard's smiling promise, repeated at least a dozen times to Edith in the course of that evening, as the latter hovered restlessly near her sister's chair, and *looked* the questions Margaret was allowed no chance of answering.

The spinsters, probably guessing how it would be, had declined the pressing invitation they had received to stay and have their tea at the rectory. They scarcely suffered Mr. Simcon to deposit his fair charge at her own door, ere they hurried him away, on the pretence of not liking to intrude upon the husband and wife in the first moments of their re-union. If the rectory party guessed the real cause of this rapid flitting, the ladies, at least, viewed it without extraordinary severity.

At length Edith's involuntary penance came to an end. She had left the married lovers at an early hour, feeling, for the first time since she had known her brother-in-law, a slight degree of anger against him. But in about half-an-hour after her flight, Margaret joined her in her bed-room, and declared that she was come to make amends for her husband's bad behaviour.

"I am not sure that I shall speak to him again for a month," said Edith, placing an

easy chair for her sister. "But now do not let us waste the few minutes his lordship may choose to leave us together, for I am really dying to hear all about your visit."

"Well, what shall I begin with, Edith. The bride and bridegroom, or—"

"Oh," interrupted the sister eagerly, "it is of the mother, *la mia madre*, that I wish to hear first of all. Tell me frankly how she seemed, and if she ever spoke of me."

"Mrs. Boisragon," said Margaret in a suddenly subdued voice, "is greatly changed. I was shocked and startled on first seeing her, Edith, in no common degree. She received me kindly, but I fancied my presence troubled her, and I avoided, as much as I possibly could, forcing myself upon her notice. She did not appear to enter so warmly into Nettia's schemes for the future, as I should have expected, and Sir Stuart and his mother-

in-law might pass for strangers to each other, notwithstanding that he is constantly endeavouring, as far as his proud nature will allow, to break down the barriers opposed to their nearer communion."

"But I had understood," said Edith, "that they were all to live together. Is it not so?"

"Yes, this is the present arrangement, to which I am convinced Mrs. Boisragon has only consented because Nettia would not have married without it had been made. But unless things change materially, the mother will not stay with them six months. She is restless, unhappy, and I fear strangely irritable at times."

"And she *was* an angel," said Edith, folding her hands, and paying no heed to the large tears that were rolling down her cheeks.

"Well," continued Margaret more cheerfully, "I have now told you the worst of

my news, dearest Edith, and even about this I see no reason to despair. Mrs. Boiragon requires change of scene and faces. They are all going abroad at the end of next month, and Nettia is very sanguine concerning the effect of travelling, on her mother's spirits."

"Tell me something cheering then, dear Margey. You think Annie is quite contented with her destiny?"

"More than contented. She is like a sunbeam, irradiating all around her. Stuart Bernarde *must* be happy with such a wife."

"Did he appear happy, Margey?"


"Sometimes, when his mother-in-law was not present to oppress him with her gloom. But he was always moderately cheerful, and entirely devoted, in his gentle and rather stately way, to Nettia, who has obtained a much greater influence over him than she had formerly, by refraining from depreciating herself as she used to do. Stuart's fallibility has lessened, in

some degree, the enormous distance that Annie's strange humility led her to imagine between them. She still almost venerates the man who possesses her heart, but she does not give so much expression to this sentiment, and as he respects her infinitely more, depend upon it they will be the happier for it."

"How I hope it may be so, Margaret," said Edith, earnestly. "But I fear your beautiful doctrine of 'good out of things evil,' has led you to draw these pleasant inferences."

"No, Edith—what I have told you is pure fact, of which you will no doubt have an opportunity some day of judging for yourself. And now do you wish to hear about the marriage ceremony, the bride's dress, or any other small reality connected with my recent visit?"

"Thank you, Margaret, but I have no farther curiosity. Go back to your husband, dear ; I have abundant food for



thought, not only for to-night, but for many a day and week to come."


"Dearest Edith, you are not going to fret about what I have told you concerning Mrs. Boisragon, I hope."

"No, only to reflect.—Good night, Margey."

CHAPTER XXI.

SUNSHINE AND STORM.


IN due course of time—that is to say on the twenty-fourth of August, 18—, Edith and Joseph Armstrong were married. The bridegroom's sisters came down to Fernley to be present at the ceremony, but the father and mother excused themselves on the plea of not liking to take so long a journey, and neither their new daughter-in-law, nor anybody else, particularly remarked or regretted their absence.



It was rather a gayer wedding than Margaret's had been, and although Miss Eliza failed in gaining her point about the breakfast, she was compensated, in some degree, for the disappointment, by being invited to superintend the preparations for the one to be given, on rather a magnificent scale, at the rectory.

Mr. Simeon again acted the part of father to the bride, and Mr. Howard performed the ceremony ; Joseph's tall sisters rejoicing in the distinction of holding the gloves and bouquet of the "poor little dwarf" of their ancient rivalry, and both of them greatly consoled for playing such a subordinate part by the comfortable conviction that the bridesmaids outshone, by a million of degrees, the pale and nervous-looking bride.

It was no wonder that Edith should be nervous and agitated, while the marriage service was being read ; that the bright sunbeams, streaming in through the stained windows of the village church, should re-



mind her of the one that had shone upon the pallid and stiffening features of her first ill-fated bridegroom, or that her present husband's warm kiss of love, when the final benediction had been given, should make her blood for a moment curdle with horror, as it brought forcibly to her mind poor Alick's last fond caress, the fire of which was changed into ice, by the cold, cold hand of death.

But Joseph was the very person, with his plain, matter-of-fact, but most sincere devotion, to dispel unhealthy reminiscences like these, and by the time they were all seated at the breakfast table, Edith, or Mrs. Joseph (as her new sisters made a great parade of calling her) had quite regained her usual composure, and was ready to reply, with cheerful smiles, to the kind congratulations of her friends and neighbours.

Nothing of any interest or importance occurred during the breakfast, as Miss

Eliza Cargill had taken especial pains to get a seat between two individuals whose faculties of hearing were in the highest state of perfection, and she had also collected a few choice ideas as reserve observations, less likely to arrest general attention, than the unfortunate one concerning matrimony, which she had on a former occasion addressed confidentially to Mr. Howard's deaf friend.

So everything went on very quietly and pleasantly, until it was time to dress the bride for her journey, when clinging round her sister's neck she cried with a sort of reckless abandonment that her loving husband would have been equally puzzled and distressed at witnessing.

Happily, however, for all parties, he knew nothing about it, and the slight redness that lingered round Edith's eyes when half an hour after she joined him down stairs, was placed to the account of a bride's peculiar privilege, and only elicited from

the kind-hearted Joseph an entreaty that she would not agitate herself unnecessarily.

In a few minutes more "the parting words were said and over," and Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Armstrong on their road to Wales, where Edith, from its association with her mother, had expressed a desire to spend the honeymoon.

* * * *

Some time before that winter set in, old Hannah received orders to prepare Woodleigh cottage, (now Edith's own property) for the reception of the newly married pair, and scarcely had she obeyed all the directions sent to her, ere Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong arrived.

"Well, my good Hannah," said her young mistress, when, a few days after they were settled at home, she happened to be alone with the old servant, "I hope you are quite satisfied with the present state of

things ; and that you will put no faith in dreams, for the future."

Hannah looked steadily at the speaker for several minutes, and then, in a low and rather mysterious voice, she said—

" You are getting the image of your mother, as she was when I first knew her—I hope *you* love your husband."

Edith was a little startled, but she replied presently without any symptom of anger—

" Indeed I do, Hannah. He is so very, very good to me—but what led you to express such a wish just now?"

" I was thinking of your mother, and of all she suffered for having married without love, and then running away from your father. But though you're getting as like her in face as you can be, there's a great difference in your natures. I loved my poor, blessed missis as I can never love anybody else—but she hadn't your sweet temper, that I must say, though of late years it was a rare thing to see her in a regular

passion—And so, ma'am, you've found out that the old woman didn't make such a mistake about Mr. Joseph, after all."

"I have found out that my husband is a most admirable and excellent creature, Hannah, and that he suits me remarkably well. I only trust that he will not be as much disappointed in his wife, as she has been agreeably surprised in him."

"It doesn't look very like it, at present, however," said Hannah, with a sort of grim smile, which was, probably, intended to express satisfaction. "And I'm glad to see you both so pleased with each other. You might have gone farther, and fared worse than you have done, I can tell you. Mr. Joseph's got a fine heart."

Edith was quite convinced that he had, and she soon began to feel, for her husband, that love which is worth all the romantic sentiments in the world—the love which comes after marriage, and is founded on a knowledge of the worthiness, and an

experience of the forbearing kindness and affection of the companion who sits daily beside us at the table and the fireside, and participates in all our joys and sorrows.

For about a year and half they lived quietly and happily at Woodleigh Cottage; and then Fernley Manor becoming again vacant, they yielded to the earnest solicitations of their friends in that place, and removed, with all their household gods, to Edith's old home. There were other circumstances which, in some measure, influenced them in this change of abode, one being the sudden death of Mr. Armstrong, senior, by which Joseph came in for a pretty considerable fortune, and another being the marriage of Louisa Armstrong with Monsieur de la Tour, and their settling in London, where it would have been almost impossible for Joseph and his wife to avoid a certain degree of intimacy with them. And as Edith felt that this would materially interfere with

her comfort, it was judged best to escape it by making Fernley their permanent abode.

The next three years of Edith's life were certainly among the happiest, if not the happiest she had ever known. Leading an active, useful existence (for it was her pleasure to assist Margaret, now a mother of two children, in all her various duties) thoroughly cured of vain dreaming, feeling that she constituted the chief pride and happiness of her devoted husband, and surrounded by the kindest friends, what more could her heart desire.

Edith desired nothing more of individual contentment, but she did occasionally give an anxious and uneasy thought towards one dear and never forgotten friend, whose destiny had not brightened as her own had done, and who was now dragging out a probably wretched existence, alone, and in a strange land.

Sir Stuart and Lady Bernarde came once during these three years to Fernley Manor, and from them Mrs. Armstrong

learned that their mother had left them a very few months after their marriage, and that she had lived ever since on the Continent, turning a deaf ear to all their earnest and repeated solicitations to return to them.

"This," said Nettia to Edith, "is the only cloud upon my happiness, for although dear Stuart strikes you and others as looking melancholy, he is not really so ; and every year, I rejoice to observe, adds to the serenity and cheerfulness of his disposition."

The time that the Bernardes spent at the Manor-house was the gayest that the quiet people at Fernley had known for many years. Edith and Joseph were most anxious to do honour to their esteemed guests, and their example was eagerly followed by the inmates of the cottage and the rectory ; so that when Nettia and her husband returned, at length, to their secluded home in Scotland, the impression on both their minds was, that they had been leading quite a dissipated

life, and that their kind friends in England formed the most delightful and sociable circle in the world.

"The Armstrongs appear perfectly happy together," said Sir Stuart to his gentle Annie; "and yet no two people could be more unlike in character and disposition."

"The husband's thorough goodness of heart," replied Annie, "atones for any slight deficiency in the head, and soften down all those points in his character, which might otherwise be uncongenial to Edith's finer and more sensitive nature. I have the highest opinion of Joseph Armstrong."

"So have I," rejoined the baronet. "But his wife merits some praise too. She has conquered her faults, and cultivated her virtues, in a manner, that I believe few naturally vain women succeed in doing. She deserves to be as happy as she is."

"And may they both long continue

so," said Annie, fervently. "Poor Edith has had her share of tribulation."

How short-sighted is mortal wisdom. How often erroneous its most natural conclusions. How little do we know of the degree of chastening necessary to purify and to elevate a frail human heart, and to fit it for the full reception of Divine grace and holiness.

Edith had been walking for awhile in smooth and pleasant paths, and all the trials of her girlhood were becoming (as her mother had predicted) but as a dream long dreamt to her. There was, too, in her present existence a tranquillity, a repose, a quiet sameness, that forbade any thought of danger near, and on which the faintest note of coming strife would have fallen as strangely as a sudden tempest on a waveless and glassy sea.

Nevertheless, in the midst of all this beautiful stillness and serenity, the storming once more arose, and created a new scene of havoc and desolation.

Living altogether in the country, and without a regular occupation, Joseph Armstrong had become a keen sportsman, and Edith's own nature being perfectly fearless, it never occurred to her that there was the slightest peril for her husband in following the hounds whenever they met in their neighbourhood, or in leaping five-barred gates, or performing any other of the horsemanship feats for which the young master of Fernley Manor had soon rendered himself famous.

The wife was returning one day alone from a visit to the rectory, when an unusual gathering and confusion round the gates of their own house, induced her to quicken her steps and to feel a sort of vague uneasiness which she could not account for, till old Nero, who was closely following his mistress, suddenly darted forwards, and as he forced his way through the crowd, uttered a loud and piteous whine, which fell like a death-knell on poor Edith's affrighted ear.

Rushing on now, without thought or reflection, pushing aside two or three compassionate people who would have arrested her steps, she overtook the moving crowd at the foot of the broad terrace, and giving one wild, startled look at her husband's dead body—which the bearers had just set down—dropped, without word or moan, on the cold stones by his side.

It was old Hannah who took up the unconscious wife, and carried her tenderly into the house, and who wept for her as if she had been her own child, long before those closed eyes opened again to the light of day, and *with* her during the dark days and nights that succeeded, when even a sister's sympathy was rejected, and every breathing of hope or consolation turned from with the sickly loathing of despair.

CHAPTER XXII.

A PROPOSED PILGRIMAGE.

"ALONE, dearest Edith—quite alone! You cannot really be serious in this intention."

"Can I ever be otherwise than serious again, Margaret? My resolution, though only now communicated to you, is no sudden fancy. It is the result of mature thought, and my firm conviction that there is no other work remaining for me on earth. You may remember that on the

occasion of my second marriage, I told you I believed *that* was the path of duty distinctly pointed out to me. The one I now propose to enter upon is equally clear and determined. I dare not shrink from it, even if I would; but happily my heart is warmly engaged in this matter. Listen, dear Margey, and try to judge dispassionately, without reference to personal feeling of any kind."

"Nay, Edith, that would be impossible; nothing but time can reconcile me to the thoughts of losing you—perhaps for ever. Of seeing you set forth alone on a pilgrimage that may last for years—and probably end in utter weariness and disappointment. Depend upon it, since Mrs. Boisragon declines to let even her daughter know the place of her abode, she has found friends or acquaintances capable of filling her heart and giving an interest to her life. It is not in human nature to mourn hopelessly for ever, and Mrs. Boisragon is but mortal after all."

“True Margey, and therefore she cannot be above human sympathy and affection. Like herself, I am now alone in the world—do not look so reproachfully at me. I know you love me—but you have a husband and children—and to you, therefore, I am in no way necessary. As far as regards those intimate ties to which the heart clings as to a dearer and more precious life, I *am* alone in the world. And so is that broken-hearted mother. Margaret, it seems to me now, that I had no right to the quiet happiness of the last few years, that while she was mourning, I should not have been rejoicing—that there was an utter selfishness in the peace and comfort that I enjoyed while my husband lived. Now that I am free again, I am doubly bound to atone for all this—and, with the help of Heaven, I will do so.”

“Edith, I am converted,” said Margaret, with a sigh, as she gazed at her sister’s pale and earnest face, “not to your mor-

bid ideas about the moral necessity for this proposed wandering, or to your strange opinion respecting the blessings vouchsafed to you in your married life. But I am convinced of the expediency of your undertaking, because I see that you could not live without an object—that your mind is even now getting into a diseased and unhealthy state. Therefore, my dear sister, terrible as it will be to part with you, I shall offer not another word of opposition to your going, and be the first to say, God speed you on your mission.”

“Thank you, dear Margey. It is a consolation to me to have you on my side,” said Edith, in a tone of deep dejection. “I have now, only to make preparations for departure.”

“And what time have you fixed for this?”

“I hope it will be about the beginning of next month—before the anniversary of my husband’s death. I *must* escape that, if I can. Oh! Margey, what awful scenes

I have been called upon to witness during the last eight years. Death—death! there has been nothing but death for me!”

Margaret did not reply. She was looking at the still youthful form beside her, at that once so beautiful and attractive face, now sharpened and changed by sorrow; and the melancholy widow's garb, which clothed, for the second time, the beloved sister whom, from infancy, she had so tenderly watched and prayed for.

“Do not weep for me, dearest Margey,” said Edith, seeing that large tears were filling the kind eyes of her silent companion. “Sooner or later we must all reap as we have sown—and believe me, I still look forward to content and peace of heart, when the remembrance of my last bitter trial shall have become dim. Let me tell you about my present plans.”

Margaret drew nearer to her sister, and passed her arm round the widow's slender

waist—while Edith, with a faint smile of acknowledgment for this quiet sympathy, continued,

“I shall, of course, give up Fernley Manor entirely, when I go. That house has always been unfortunate to me—and Woodleigh Cottage, which is now vacant again, I shall leave as before, in Hannah’s charge. My wish is, if I succeed in finding Mrs. Boisragon, and obtaining her forgiveness, to prevail upon her to return to England, and reside with me in my own dear mother’s home. The only attendant I propose taking abroad with me is Mary—whose long services and attachment have made her almost necessary to my comfort. Otherwise, I might travel alone from north to south, from east to west, with perfect safety. Who could look with any sentiment, save that of pity, on a miserable, faded creature, such as I am now.”

If Margaret’s opinion on this subject differed from that of her sister, she refrained from giving expression to it ; and

soon after, as the children came into the room, indulging in that noisy mirth which is only musical to a mother's ears, Edith bade Mrs. Howard and her little family a hasty adieu, and returned with a weary heart to her lonely home.

About three weeks from this time, and just two days before the first anniversary of her husband's death, Mrs. Armstrong—having said farewell to all her sorrowing friends at Fernley, and to her second mother-in-law (who was still living with her unmarried daughter, in London)—set out upon her voyage of discovery, cheered and supported by her own strong faith in its ultimate success.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LAST.

EIGHTEEN months had rolled their silent course since the event recorded at the close of the last chapter ; and the scene, upon which the curtain now draws up, is a large bedroom, in one of the quietest hotels, in one of the quietest towns in Germany.

The season is autumn, and a bright but not sultry sun streams through the only half closed blinds into the pleasant apartment, and makes a long dusty beam from

the windows to the damask curtained bed, in which, though it is past midday, a pale, elderly lady appears to be sleeping profoundly.

At a short distance, and with her still beautiful eyes fixed intently on the occupant of the bed, sits another and a younger lady, whose face though very pale, has a calm and happy expression, and whose hand is laid on the open pages of an English bible that rests on a small table at her side.

It will be scarcely necessary to say that these are Mrs. Boisragon and Edith Armstrong, brought together in this strange country at last.

The latter who appeared quite contented to sit and watch the unconscious sleeper, (though there was at times a slight anxiety expressed in her countenance), was suddenly startled by the gentle opening of a door at the other end of the room ; and rising to prevent the entrance of the intruder, she received into her hand a thickly

folded letter, bearing the English postmark, and addressed in the well known writing of her sister Margaret.

With a look of real delight, Edith eagerly broke the seal, and remaining as far as possible from the bed, that the rustling of the paper might not awake her sleeping companion, she skimmed rapidly over the following—

“MY OWN DEAR EDITH,

“Your last letter gave us all the greatest happiness, not only because it conveyed the intelligence that the object of your long wandering was accomplished, that you had found her whom you so perseveringly sought—but because we perceive from your style of writing that peace and contentment have once more returned to you, and that the sun and the moon are no longer darkened, as they were when you left Fernley. Dearest Edith, we are all longing so to have you amongst us

again, and whether your plan of getting Mrs. Boisragon (should she recover) to Woodleigh Cottage, succeeds or not, you must positively come and spend two or three months with your Fernley relatives, first. The cottage people (who are precisely the same kind, pleasant creatures as ever) will be delighted to receive their cousin, and they are talking of summoning the Bernardes from Scotland, that there may be a general family meeting. You of course, dearest, belong exclusively to the rectory ; I assure you the mere chance of your coming has been of wonderful benefit to our poor garden, which the children cause Charles to neglect shamefully. But he is working away diligently now, and I know, as well as possible, that it's all on your account. The only bit of news I have for you—(you need not to be told what ridiculously quiet people we are) is that your sister-in-law and her French husband have had a formal separation, and that he is said to be growing into a very

reckless character indeed. Probably this will not surprise you. And now, my own Edith, with more love than this sheet of paper will contain (especially as my little ones insist upon inclosing notes to their pretty aunt,) I must say farewell, entreating you again and again not to disappoint us, or to delay longer than is absolutely necessary the visit we shall so eagerly anticipate.

“Ever, ever your devoted sister,

“MARGARET HOWARD.”

As Edith with quite a cheerful smile, laid down this affectionate letter, her ear caught the doctor's well known tread in the passage, and softly opening the door, she admitted him into the room.

“Is all right?” he asked, glancing towards the bed, and then taking a seat near Edith.

“I think so,” was the low reply. “She

has been sleeping **very** calmly for the last two hours."

"That will do, ma'am," said the old English physician, who, in his frequent visits to Mrs. Boisragon, had learned to feel quite an interest in his **young** countrywoman. "That will do admirably—and the good lady there must thank you, under Providence, for getting so quickly through an illness like hers. She has been particularly fortunate, in my idea ; for it isn't every poor creature who falls sick in a strange country that has the luck of being recognized and nursed tenderly, by an old friend."

"*I* was very fortunate," replied Edith, "in coming to this hotel at the very time when there was an opportunity of making myself useful. Certainly these occurrences are rare."

"They are so, ma'am. But hush ! think our patient moves. Stay wher

you are, and I will prepare her for seeing you."

* * * *

The shades of evening were gathering fast over the autumn sky, and only a few bright reflections from the crimson clouds that were yet lingering in the west, fell upon the high windows of the room where Edith and Mrs. Boisragon were now alone together.

The former was sitting on the large bed with one arm thrown tenderly round the still very feeble invalid, who, propped up with numerous pillows, that she might the more easily look into the sweet, earnest face of her young companion, was repeating, for the twentieth time, her grateful acknowledgments for all the love and care which Edith had lavished upon her.

"Ah, *mia madre!*" was the soft answer, "you can form no idea of the pleasure of my task—and even had it been one of toil or pain, should I not be more than recompensed by your precious words of love and forgiveness."

"Forgiveness, my Edith! It is I who should implore that of you. God has humbled my stubborn heart, at last, and I can see now, why I have been kept without hope or consolation during so many weary years."

"Let us not talk or think of the past now, *mia madre*. The future is before us both, and it will be indeed my supreme delight to devote my life to you. I have no other hope, no other object, and you must not, you *will* not, refuse to let me be your daughter, and endeavour, in some slight degree, to atone to you for your recent sufferings, and the loneliness of these years of cruel exile. We have both been bereft of those most dear to us, and why should we not be all in all to each other."

Mrs. Boisragon gazed through thickly falling tears at the pale though animated face of the little creature, whom she had once so fondly loved. And was it not love that beamed from her own agitated countenance, at present, as she drew Edith closer to her, and stroked the soft hair that was plainly braided under the simple widow's cap? Was it not love that trembled in every note of her still languid voice, as, in reply to her daughter-in-law's last words, she said—

“God will bless you, dearest, for the self devotion you have meditated. But, Edith, this must not be. You are yet young and lovely, almost as lovely as in the old, happy times, and I am aged and worn with sorrow. For you the world may still have many joys and blessings. For me it can only have a grave. My child, my Edith, I will not accept your sacrifice.”

Then Edith, with a bright and loving smile, turned suddenly, and took up the Bible that lay on the little table near the

bed. Opening it quickly, where a marker had been placed, she read, in a low and deeply impressive voice, these words—

“Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee, for whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more, also, if ought but death part thee and me.”

THE END.



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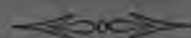
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